

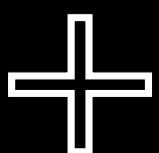
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NO LIMITS

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BLIND

NIGHT FRIGHT: SURVIVAL AT SEA
CANOEING ACROSS CANADA



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Boomerang

There's a rollercoaster in western New York called the Boomerang. For months, my brother and I had been looking forward to this ride, which plummets 125 feet and makes three complete loops, first forward and then in reverse. For once, the hype got it right: "Backwards or forwards, you won't know which direction you are going on Boomerang."

My father, who is blind, strapped in with us.

I didn't see a lot of my dad growing up. He lived on the other side of the country, and had only recently returned from three years in Fiji. Like most kids, I idolized my father, and those long absences seemed only to add to my admiration. That summer when I was 12 years old, he seemed infallible.

I have never thought of my father as disabled. His blindness seemed to give him superhuman abilities. He could tell

whether a door was open or closed by the frequency of the white noise in the room. He spoke seven languages, could play any instrument with strings and charmed everyone he met. I got used to people telling me how extraordinary he was.

"Yes," I'd say. "I know."

The first time either of us encountered a double kayak, when I was 8 years old, he climbed in and we charged out to sea. It was an opportunity to try something new, and he took it. The Boomerang was different. That ride managed to combine everything that set my father on edge—crowds and noise, disorientation and lack of control. His reaction was something I'd never seen in him before: fear. The Boomerang scared the piss out of him.

When the coaster finally came to a stop, my brother took his arm and led him straight back into line. I don't know why my dad got back on that ride. I like

to think he did it for us, to show his sons that this time at least, he was there for us. Whatever the reason, the effect was profound. That was the first time I had seen my dad as vulnerable, but what I remember from that day is the depth of his inner strength.

I thought about that moment often as we worked on this "No Limits" issue of *Canoe & Kayak*, and in particular the feature about blind kayakers Erik Weihenmayer and Lonnie Bedwell running the Grand Canyon ("Blind Faith," p 34). Weihenmayer is the first blind person to climb Mount Everest, but whitewater scares him more than any mountain. In big water Weihenmayer feels the same sense of total disorientation my dad experienced on that rollercoaster, but without the tracks and safety bars. His determination to confront that fear should be an inspiration to all of us. — Jeff Moag

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Blind paddlers Erik Weihenmayer and Lonnie Bedwell conquer their fears to kayak the hallowed waters of the Grand Canyon.

By Buddy Levy

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C&K Expeditions Editor Jon Turk heads south, finding much different (and unexpected) paddling challenges deep in the jungle highlands of the Venezuelan rainforest.

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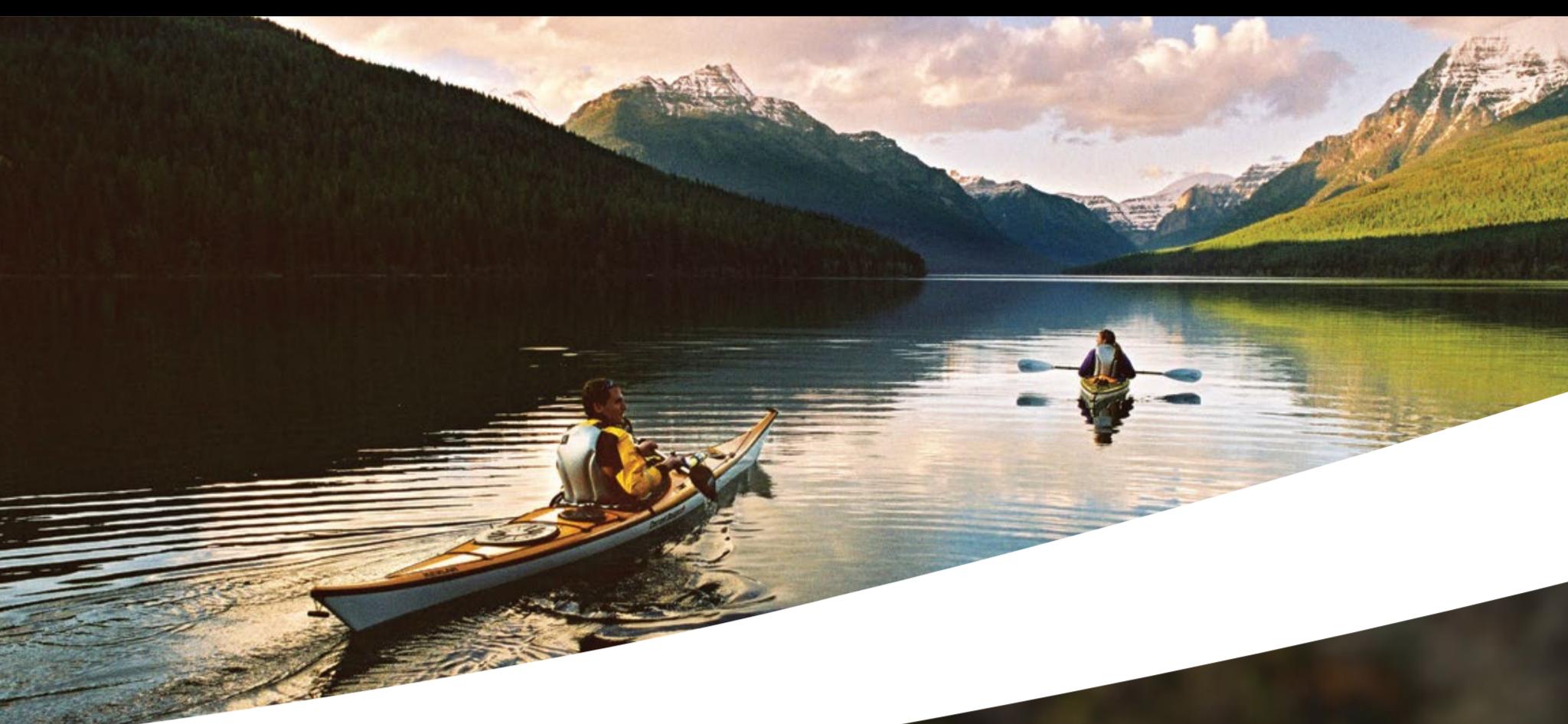
ON THE COVER

Athabasca Canyon, Jasper National Park, Alberta.

Photo by Chris Burkard.

THIS PAGE Jackson Lake, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming. *Photo by Justin Bailie.*





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LETTER
OF THE
MONTH

RE: FUEL'S GOLD

The irony [of canoeing the Missouri River through the Bakken oil boom] is as raw and unpretentious as the landscape: People paddling plastic boats with plastic paddles, wearing synthetic clothing, sleeping in synthetic tents and floating down the river covered in insecticide while taking pictures with devices made of plastic and gold. They get there and back by burning petroleum. Everything they do, save for their locomotion on the river, is powered by petroleum. And they're there to document the degradation of wilderness that comes from extracting that petroleum. Such is the human condition. Always has been. Always will be. Great article! — Ken M.



RE: THE GEAR WE LOVE: SPOON CRUSHES SPORK

You think a plastic spoon is good enough? Nope, the spork is an excellent fork. And an excellent spoon. My titanium one cuts steak, no worries. Your spoon do that? I won't be trading in my spork any time —Anonymous 'Spoonweasel'



RE: CANOEIST KEITH LYNCH'S NEW (4,000-MILE) AMERICAN DREAM

An inspiration to all who are locked into the rat-race, Keith has shown everyone an alternative. — Allen B.

I am more moved by Keith Lynch's 4000-mile, five-river journey than any of those crazy Class V first descents of some remote canyon in some far-flung country. Keith is the dark horse, the underdog, the class loner who makes us all raise our glass high and shout out three cheers! — Norm M.

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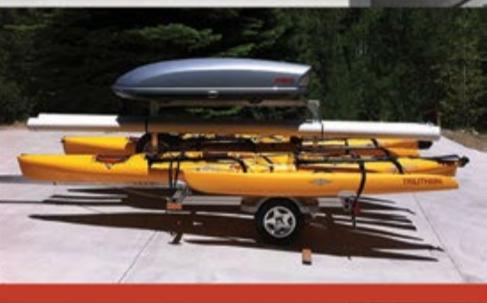
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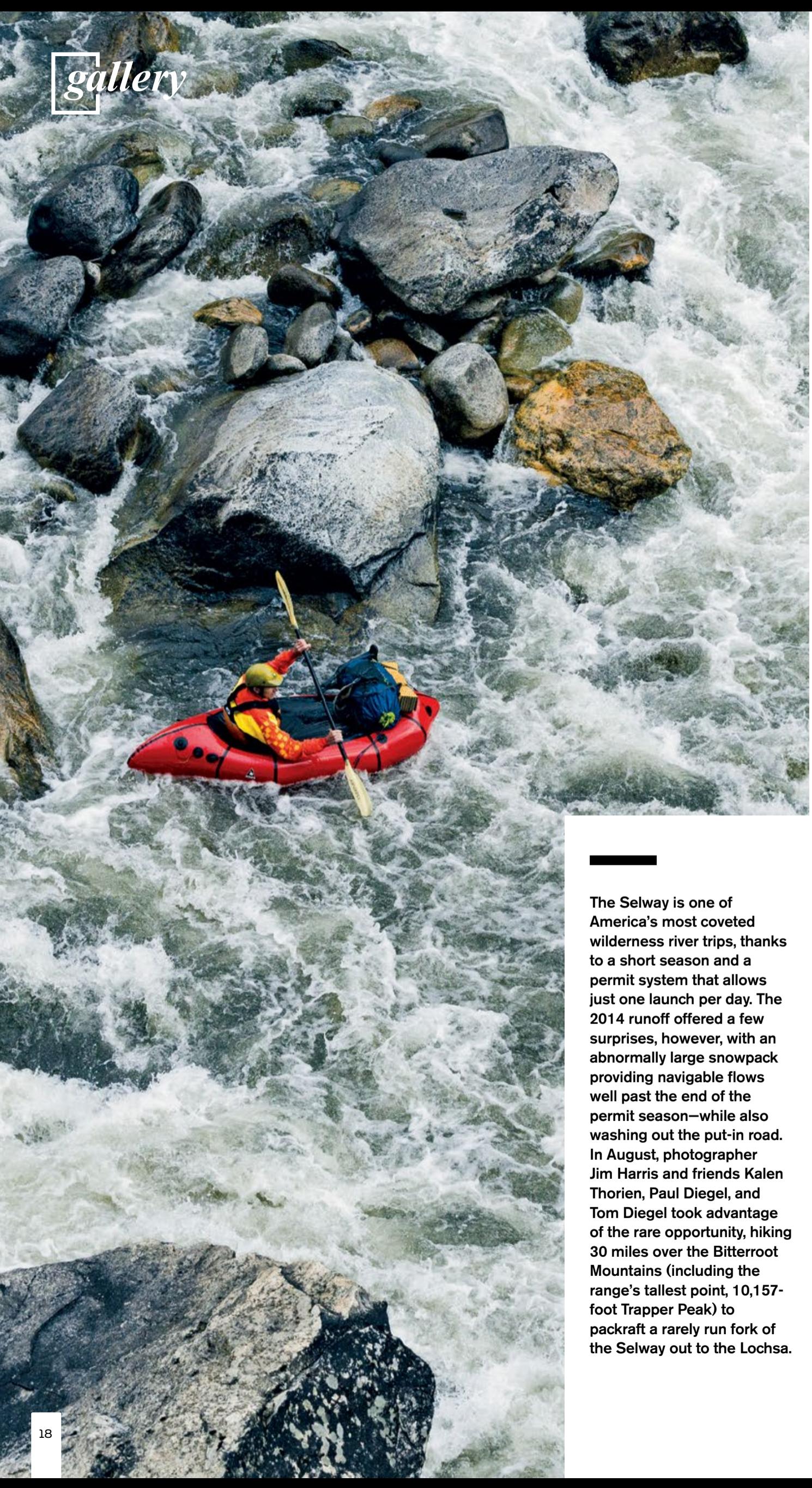
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— CHRISTIAN ADAM

~~ MALIGNE LAKE, ALBERTA



gallery



The Selway is one of America's most coveted wilderness river trips, thanks to a short season and a permit system that allows just one launch per day. The 2014 runoff offered a few surprises, however, with an abnormally large snowpack providing navigable flows well past the end of the permit season—while also washing out the put-in road. In August, photographer Jim Harris and friends Kalen Thorien, Paul Diegel, and Tom Diegel took advantage of the rare opportunity, hiking 30 miles over the Bitterroot Mountains (including the range's tallest point, 10,157-foot Trapper Peak) to packraft a rarely run fork of the Selway out to the Lochsa.





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Head to CanoeKayak.com to read more and see a full photo feature on Harris's "low-budget, backyard-style wilderness adventure."

gallery



 MIKE LEEDS MIKE VOORHEES, MICAH KNEIDL, DREW NIENSTEDT, SETH STOENNER & SHANE HATCH SUCCOR CREEK, OREGON





MY BREAK- FAST- FAST WITH RANTA

A TIM HORTONS
RENDEZVOUS DURING MIKE
RANTA'S SINGLE-SEASON
VOYAGE ACROSS CANADA

PHOTOS AND STORY
BY DAVID JACKSON

My search for Mike Ranta began just upriver of Ottawa. I knew Mike and his Finnish Spitz (named Spitz) were paddling out there somewhere, nearing the final stretch of a long eastward journey across Canada—and I knew he'd be stopping at the Arnprior Marina.

I slept in my car at the docks so I wouldn't miss the man and his mutt. The pair had been canoeing since leaving Vancouver, B.C., by way of the Fraser River on April 1. Mike's simple hope was to inspire and raise money for the youth from his hometown of Atikokan, Ontario, many of whom planned to greet him in the capital city. When my phone rang at 6 a.m., an alarmingly friendly voice asked, "I'm at the Arnprior Marina, where the heck are ya, eh?"

I scratched my head, then heard Spitz bark out a warning. Then another. The small dog appeared ahead of a shout: "SPITZ! ENOUGH!" There was Mike, a hulking man with a birch-bark hat, a stout beard, and the grin of a man possessed by happiness. As we shook hands, Spitz stood back with an irrepressible glare. I offered Mike a quick trip

to Tim Hortons. After more than 3,000 miles of canoeing, how could he say no to donuts? These two had spent the past five and half months in the most remote reaches of Canada, at one point going two weeks without human interaction.

We placed our orders: coffee for me; two extra-large coffees, two muffins, two breakfast sandwiches, and hash browns for Mike. The mammoth meal was less surprising than Mike's complete separation from societal life as we civilized folks know it. It was as if I'd met a voyageur just home from the fur trade, an altruistic soul with the spirit of Canada deeply seeded into his glimmering eyes. People watched in amazement as Mike stood in his knee-high rubber boots, towering over a copy of the *Ottawa Sun*, totally absorbed by a world so foreign to the daily trials of his labor.

He told me stories of vivid dreams during his week of pristine weather on Lake Superior, of coyotes in the night attacking the tent to get after Spitz, and of near misses on log-choked rivers. Mike didn't speak about politics or his latest Instagram post, nor did he ever falter in his perfect temperament and keen disposition. He spoke of putting kilometers behind him, the way Spitz laughed when he blundered, and the connection he



ON OCTOBER 31, Mike Ranta, 42, finished his 4,750-mile journey near Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia. He is now crafting the world's largest canoe paddle while applying to the Guinness Book of World Records for the official title of "longest solo canoe trip in a single season."

feels to the natural world. Never did he mention miserable rains, awful thunderstorms, or the imminent currents and ocean tides that lay ahead.

In the September dawn glow, Mike's canoe slowly eased out of eerily silent marina, Spitz's howl from the stern the only sound over the headwind on the vacant Ottawa River. I drove away feeling deflated with the relative ease of my car, the warning light reminding me that I needed to fetch my credit card and top off an unquenchable tank. I went on with my Saturday just like everyone around me. I couldn't help but think how Mike was still out there paddling.



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PUT IN » CHOICES



ANATOMY OF AN ACCIDENT

BREAKING DOWN THE DECISIONS THAT LEAD TO DANIEL FOX'S EPIC CRASH LANDING

BY CONOR MIHELL

Photographer Daniel Fox was on a 1,000-mile kayaking expedition from Victoria, B.C., to San Francisco last September when a series of choices caused him to experience the power of nature full-force.

CHOICE 1, Departure: The weather forecast was bleak: strong southerly winds, rain and a westerly swell. But Fox had deadlines to meet. He launched into the mouth of the Columbia River in Astoria, Ore., on an outgoing tide at noon on September 21.

CHOICE 2, Bailout: With the sea state at Columbia Bar living up to its nasty reputation, Fox decided to land in the lee of South Jetty, a breakwall extending more than a mile into the Pacific. The jetty offers shelter from the typical northwest swell, but the waves were particularly heavy, and coming from the west.

CHOICE 3, No Return: "The swell was coming dead-on and pounding my landing spot," says Fox. "I had two choices: to go back into the Columbia River against the current, or to keep going." Despite the heavy swell, the sky was clear and the sea "almost metallic due to the absence of wind." Fox aimed for Seaside Beach, 17 miles south on the Oregon coast.



André Caetano

CHOICE 4, Last Light: At twilight, Fox reached Seaside Beach and thought he saw an opening in the shore break. As he began to paddle in, three massive waves erupted in front of him. "I looked at the clouds of white seawater rising up into the sky and suddenly it became clear to me that there was no way my feet would be touching sand this evening." He turned for Indian Beach, six miles distant.

CHOICE 5, Contingency: Bioluminescence erupted from Fox's paddle strokes and the Milky Way lit up the sky. Fox began to relish the idea of paddling through the night, but as the gentle breeze grew into a 20-knot headwind, an emergency landing seemed the best option.

CHOICE 6, The Attempt: "I remembered from the map a series of rocks that could offer safe passage to Indian Beach," says Fox. "So I went for it. It was dark and all I could see around me were whitecaps." A freight-train wave capsized Fox and broke his paddle. He managed to roll up, but when the next wave rolled him again he was forced to wet-exit.

CHOICE 7, Hypothermia: A lull in the waves gave Fox a window to scramble back into his boat, grab his spare paddle and empty the cockpit. After the swim and 10 hours on the water, his energy was drained. He began to shiver. He judged the risk of hypothermia to be greater than that of a night landing in heavy surf.

CHOICE 8, Last Chance: Fox felt as if he was paddling in a dream, separated from the lights of Cannon Beach by a wall of surf. A monster wave overtook him as he made a dash for the beach. "The wave literally fell on me, and within a second the kayak was broken in two below my knees," he recalls. "It was quite a swim."

FINAL CHOICE, Return to the Sea: When his feet touched shore, Fox felt "grateful for the fact that I was alive." Though humbled, he plans to try again next year. "I think there will be a joy that would not have been there had I done it on my first attempt."



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BLIND TRUST

**LESSONS IN LIFE AND MARRIAGE FROM
A BLIND CANOEIST AND HER STERNMAN**

WORDS AND PHOTO BY LARRY RICE

Renee Kuester-Sebranek and her husband Ken Sebranek had been paddling together for more than 15 years when she lost her vision to retinitis pigmentosa. The disease began to come on strong in 2004. Two years later, at age 41, she was almost completely blind.

"I had to learn how to do everything differently. I had to develop patience, to slow down, to learn to ask for help," says Kuester-Sebranek, 50. "I am finally over my anger and denial. This is how the rest of my life is going to be, and I want to make the best of it."

For Renee, making the best of life means camping, cycling, and especially tandem whitewater canoeing with her husband Ken. One evening over pizza and beer, the couple shared insights on canoeing and marriage, blindness and trust. The next day they styled Class III-plus Brown's Canyon on Colorado's Arkansas River.

Renee: Ken and I have been paddling together for 25 years, on small lakes at first and then rivers. In 2004, when I started losing my sight, we got involved in whitewater canoeing. In a good year we paddle about 30 days.

Ken: I look at everything longer and deeper when I'm paddling with Renee. I see more details in things I might barely have glanced at otherwise. I may point something out like a deer or an eagle. When we meet other paddlers, I describe them: three canoes, a father-son trip, everybody's smiling. Renee envisions what I describe, so I really notice the pleasant things.

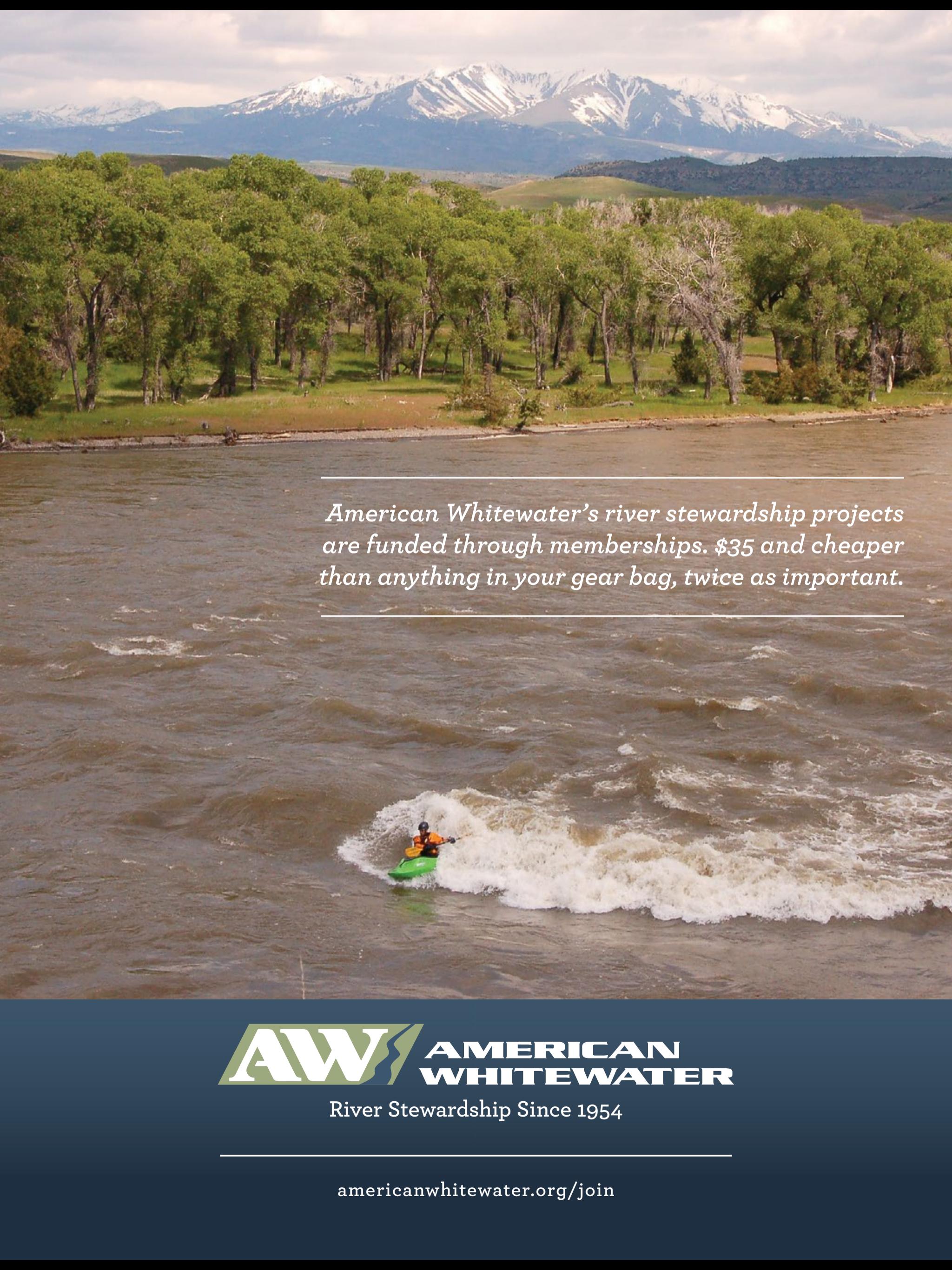
Renee: At first, I was terrified of the smallest riffles. But we've had a lot of practice and now we're pretty good paddling partners. Now I try to inhale the beauty and serenity of the river, and the power and magnificence of the rapids.

Ken: I see almost every move Renee makes and I know what she can do; she's incredible! It's our partnership—our trust in each other—that enables us to paddle well. I always want to paddle at my best when I'm with Renee.

Renee: When paddling whitewater, we try to keep it clear and simple. The louder Ken shouts the commands the more urgent I know it is. Sometimes when Ken shouts, 'Left' I go 'Right' and sometimes he shouts 'Right' when he means 'Left'. But we usually correct our mishap very quickly and avoid too much carnage.

Ken: I always try to let Renee know what happened and why: my timing was off; I misread the current; the sun got in my eyes. I let her know what I plan to do to correct the issue, and she always asks if there was something she could have done differently.

Renee: Tandem canoeing and bicycling has strengthened our marriage. I've heard that those activities, along with building a house, are a true test of a marriage. I'd say we've passed all three with flying colors. Ken will always be my first and last canoe partner.



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GRANDMA KNOWS BEST

DEB WALTERS' ALTRUISTIC ODYSSEY DOWN THE EASTERN SEABOARD

BY CONOR MIHELL



Deborah Walters isn't your everyday grandmother, which is one reason her mission is so compelling. Last July, the 63-year-old retired research scientist launched her homemade stitch-and-glue sea kayak into the Atlantic Ocean in Yarmouth, Maine. Her destination: Guatemala City. Walters' 10-month,

2,500-mile solo journey is a fundraiser for Safe Passage, a Yarmouth-based nonprofit seeking to improve educational opportunities for thousands of children living in a Guatemala garbage dump. Her goal of \$150,000 will give children a place to complete their third- and fourth-grade studies.

Over this summer, fall and winter, Walters has worked her way down the Eastern Seaboard, stopping in communities to spread her message. "What's been striking is that the people who have given the most generously have been in the less wealthy places," she says. "When you talk to people about children living in garbage dumps, they

realize those living conditions are worse than anything we have here."

Walters started sea kayaking in 1981, and has paddled throughout North America, including the high arctic and Atlantic Canada, "where you are truly alone," she says. "This is more like performing arts with high participation from the audience." And Walter's expedition for a cause ties her to that audience, and a calendar, even while keeping up a routine of 18-mile days. "On a trip for myself, I can stop when I want to stop," she notes. "But now, because of speaking engagements I've had to paddle on some days

when I shouldn't, just to keep to the schedule. It's been more strenuous."

Walters has benefited from plenty of hospitality. Though she's carrying 150 pounds of gear, including a tent, sleeping gear and food, she's rarely had to dig into her hatches. Most nights, strangers have invited Walters to stay in their homes. Others have joined her on the water, including a group of local paddlers through the bustling, tide-washed waters surrounding New York City. "It was an unreal feeling paddling through Manhattan and seeing all the landmarks," says Walters. "It was the most stress-free way of arriving in New York that you could ever imagine."

Walters had planned to "keep the shoreline on her right" and trace the Gulf of Mexico all the way to Guatemala, but she reluctantly changed her route to avoid the danger of drug cartels. Instead, she'll crew on a friend's sailboat when she arrives in Miami on April 1 and sail across the Gulf to Belize. There she'll return to paddling, with the goal of completing the Central American leg of her journey by the end of April.

"If you believe you can do it, you can do it," says Walters, who was inspired by a mother in Guatemala. "That's the message I try to pass along in my presentations. What I am doing is nothing special. It's like a series of day-trips—not a big me-against-nature thing."



LEVEL SIX

A large, high-quality photograph of a man standing on a rocky beach. He is wearing a grey and red waterproof jacket, black shorts with 'LEVEL SIX' printed on the side, a tan cap, and sunglasses. He holds a black paddle. In the background, another person is in a kayak near a massive, translucent iceberg. The water is a mix of blue and white foam. The overall scene is dramatic and suggests a cold, Arctic environment.

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Aaron McKinney

SWAN HATE Eddy's Got Answers

CAN SWANS BE DANGEROUS TO PADDLERS?

(WARNING: This article contains information about swans, which may trigger emotional distress in people whose mothers once survived exclusively on swan eggs for cultish purposes and forced young Eddy to harvest the eggs.) In 2012, a Chicago man drowned when he was knocked from his kayak and pummeled by a mute swan. He was not wearing a lifejacket. Authorities believe that the swan was defending a nest site. "All swans can be dangerous during nesting season," sniffs Madeline Link, of the Trumpeter Swan Society. The male of the breeding pair will attack predators and even hapless humans who happen to encroach on the nesting area, pecking with their beaks and using their wings to batter the victim. Don't let the elegant bearing fool you; beneath those snowy white feathers lies 30 pounds of muscle and avian aggression. "Mute swans are big and powerful enough to kill dogs with their wings," Link says, "and the male might

patrol a pretty large area." Mute swans, a species introduced from Europe, are more common in populous areas—the places from which they may have escaped captivity—but native trumpeter swans can be even larger than the mute swans. The good news: Both species behave aggressively only during nesting season, meaning spring and summer—or the "hungry months" as Mother used to call them. Other times of year, they'll generally avoid humans, swimming away if approached. Whatever the season, if you see a swan gliding menacingly toward your canoe from out of the weeds, best to turn tail and get.

IF I HAD TO EAT MY DEAD FRIEND TO SURVIVE, WOULD I FACE LEGAL PROBLEMS?

(WARNING: This article contains the word 'attorney,' which may trigger emotional distress in just about everyone.) According to an online story from *Backpacker* magazine, 43 percent of respondents to a recent poll would eat a

dead friend if it would help them survive in the wilderness. The story went on to describe the best body parts to eat, if necessary, and settled on the thighs, triceps and buttocks—basically any place where it's easy to grab a big hunk of flesh and slice it into the fry pan. That's all fine and good by Eddy, who believes no roadkill should ever go to waste, whatever the species (especially swans), and who knows that if he had any friends, they'd want him to survive rather than turn up his nose at the notion of chomping a little man-cheek. But what about this great 'society' of ours? Would you survive the empty wasteland only to be shut behind bars? "In Oregon, it is a felony to dismember, mutilate or otherwise cut up a corpse," says Portland attorney Eddie Medina. "However, under a choice of evils defense, the cannibal could argue that he had to eat his buddy to avoid imminent injury (starvation). If your canoe was full of food, and you still ate your dead buddy, you would have a problem."



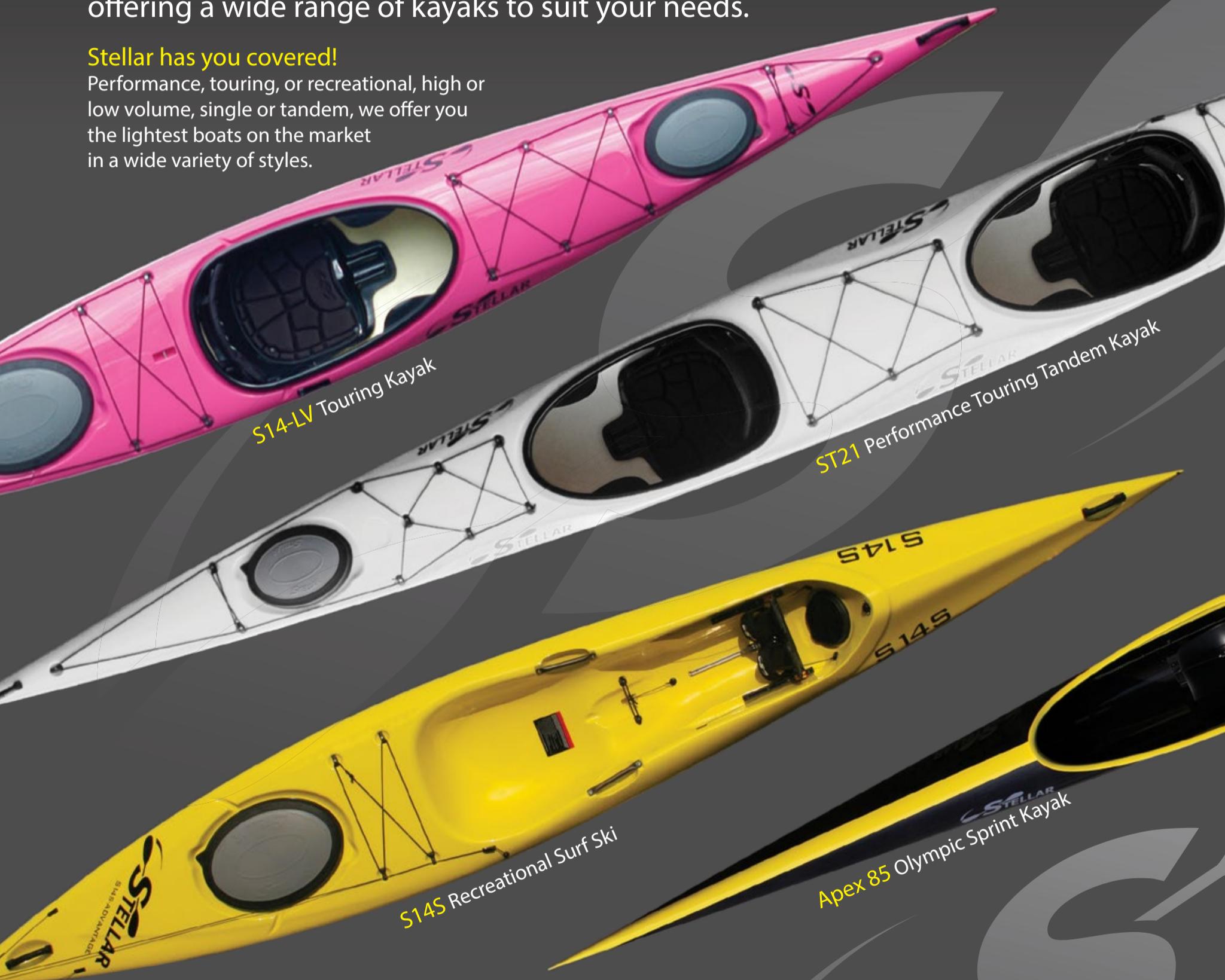
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Into the Chaos: Erik Weihenmayer charges hermit rapid, with guide Harlan Taney close behind.

BLIND FAITH

NOTHING INTIMIDATES BLIND ADVENTURER ERIK WEIHENMAYER MORE THAN THE CHAOTIC WHITEWATER OF THE GRAND CANYON. SO WHY CAN'T HE WALK AWAY?

STORY BY BUDDY LEVY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES Q. MARTIN

In the absence of light, the kayaker navigates by hearing and touch. Around him the sound of dipping paddles, voices near and far. Laughter. And, growing ever closer, the murmur of Badger Creek Rapid. The sound soon fills the canyon, ricochets back and forth, trapped between the sheer stone walls. To Erik Weihenmayer's practiced ear, it gives the place shape and scale, a sense of majesty and menace.

In the absence of light, motion comes without warning, a feeling of acceleration as the river takes him in its cool grip and slings him into the meat of first real rapid in the Grand Canyon. Now the movement is violent, abrupt. The water shoves him left, then right, shakes him up and down. Erik leans back in his boat, arms rigid, body tense and defensive. He cocks his head awkwardly. Amid the tumult—the stinging spray, the paint-shaker motion and the directionless barrage of noise—Erik Weihenmayer strains to pick out his lifeline, the voice of his friend and guide, Harlan Taney.

"Easy forward, small left!" Harlan is three boat-lengths behind, speaking into a radio headset, but the transmission fluctuates and cuts out. In Erik's headset the garbled voice doesn't provide him the guidance he needs; it merely adds to the confusion, conveying urgency but no direction. Harlan is shouting "Charge!" as Erik slams into a cold wall of water at the first big pour-over. A powerful lateral lurches him sideways. The world tosses and swells in dizzying darkness. Now the voice in Erik's head is his own: *Don't swim here.*

"Brace left, brace left!" Harlan squawks, and Erik rights himself, thinks he hears "Charge!" again, and digs in, air and spray and sound engulfing him. "You're good, you're good!" Harlan's voice crackles as Erik bounces through the last of the tail waves and eddies out, his shoulders slumping in relief.

Moments later, another pair of paddlers enters Badger. Forward leaning and aggressive, Lonnie Bedwell follows close behind his sighted guide, Iraq War veteran Seth Dahl. They don't use a radio; instead Seth yells over his shoulder, "On me! On me!" Seth shouts all the way through the rapid, craning around to ensure that Lonnie can hear him and is on his line. Lonnie attacks the waves, and when Seth hollers "Gun sights!" he lines up on the voice as if sighting down a rifle barrel. He skips along the waves like a water bug, skittering cleanly out the bottom of the rapid.

The sound of Badger Creek fades slowly away, replaced by laughter and hoots of encouragement from the river party. They number 20, among them filmmakers, a writer and photographer, kayakers and raft guides. Earlier that

morning at Lee's Ferry, director Michael Brown and his camera crew hovered and circled, wading waist-deep to film Erik and Lonnie together, then separately: close-ups, last-minute interviews, hero shots. Guides from the Arizona Raft Company heaved drybags and cargo boxes onto two enormous motorized S-rigs—dubbed the Silver Bullet and the Clampetts—that would carry tons of food and equipment for the three-week journey.

The two leading men pushed off and paddled into the canyon, flanked by eight other kayakers—their guides and safety crew. A hive of onlookers—national media members, corporate sponsors, PR firm representatives—waved and cheered.

The film crew kept its cameras trained on the flotilla of multi-colored kayaks until they disappeared around the first bend in the river. Then they scrambled onto their 37-foot, solar-canopied production raft and motored downstream, cameras rolling.

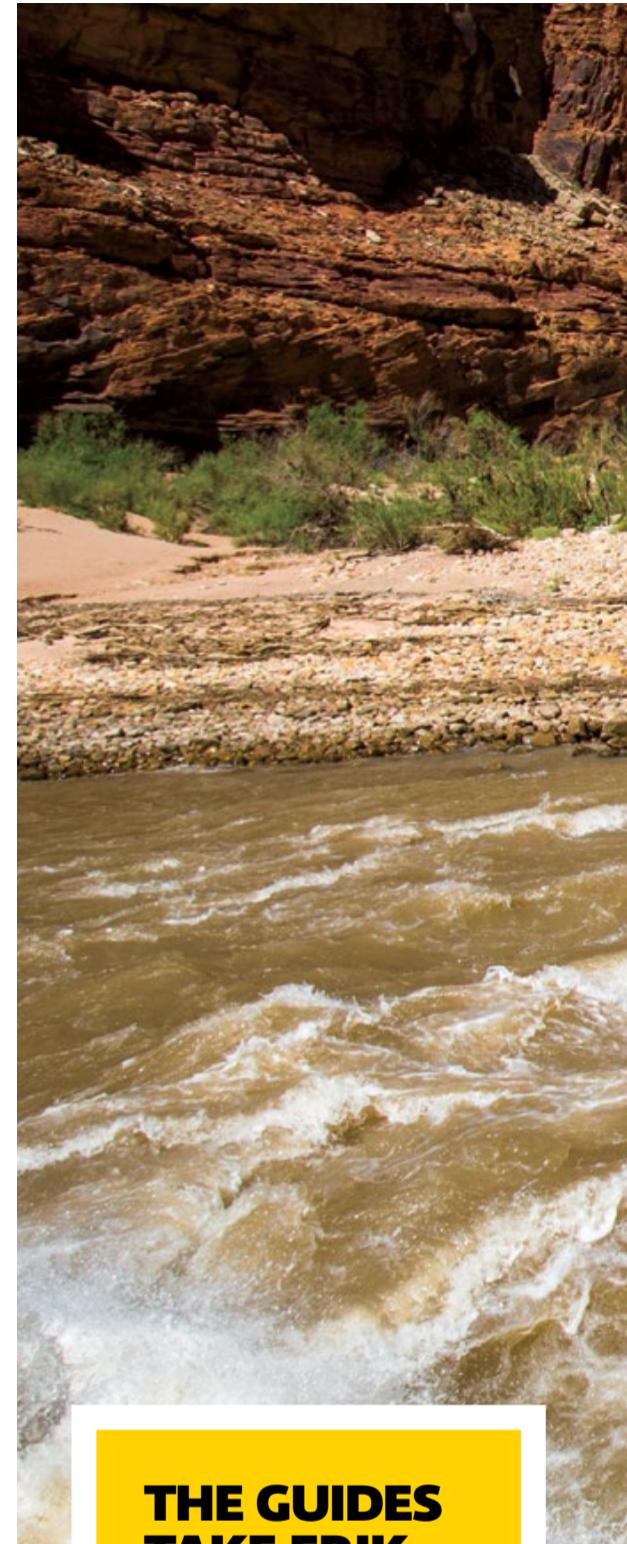
* * *

That afternoon a monsoon squall hammers the party as they set camp at Supai Ledges. The kayakers scramble up to the ledges as sheeting rains cascade down the canyon walls. It feels like a celebration. After years of preparation and a successful first day on the river, most of the paddlers strip down and stand beneath super-heated waterfalls sheering off the cliffs, showering in the warm wash, laughing and downing shots of whiskey.

Erik is distant, quiet. Later, as the boys keep reveling, he hunkers in his tent, stretching his back on a lumbar roll as the sound of pummeling rain fills the shelter. The weight of the entire enterprise bears down on him. He needs to get tweets and dispatches out to his sponsors and media outlets while there's cell and sat coverage. More disconcerting, the waterproof Neptune Bluetooth headsets he's spent years fine-tuning—his communication lifeline—is screwed.

At daybreak, Erik squats on the rocks conferring with Harlan and Rob Raker, who first taught him to roll six years ago. The river rushes past, smelling of earth and hissing with silt. The men fidget with the radios. They swap out different configurations of the units, try various on/off sequences, different headsets—but none work perfectly.

"This is stressful," says Erik, shaking his head. "I need instant information, and it has to be loud and clear, or it's useless." In Badger, he says, Harlan had sounded like Charlie Brown's teacher: "wha whaa wha whaaa." The joke is perfectly in character for Erik, as is his next move—using a satellite phone to call the company in the UK that makes the headsets, and asking them to express-air two working units to Flagstaff. From there, Erik will arrange for someone to drive the radios to the South Rim and hike them down to Phantom Ranch, where the expedition will be in a week's time. If everything comes together, Erik will have his communication lifeline before he reaches Horn Creek, Crystal, and the Canyon's most difficult rapid, Lava Falls.



THE GUIDES TAKE ERIK AND LONNIE TO THE EDGE OF THE PRECIPICE AND TELL THEM TO JUMP. "YOU JUST MAKE SURE YOU'RE HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION AND GO FOR IT," LONNIE SAYS. "KIND OF LIKE KAYAKING."



Soul Train: Erik, Harlan and Timmy O'Neil in House Rock Rapid.

* * *

Erik Weihenmayer has been solving difficult problems since losing his eyesight at the age of 14. At first he dealt with his blindness with denial and rebellion. He refused help from others, threw a cane down a sewer grate, balked at learning Braille. His anger bubbled at the surface, then boiled.

"I think there's something inside us—a kind of light. But sometimes people get shoved into a dark place, and that light almost goes out," he says. "A lot of times, making hard choices is what feeds that light, and becomes the energy we need to push us forward."

For Erik, that difficult choice was accepting his blindness. He decided to stop dwelling on the things he couldn't do, and focused instead on things he *could* do. In high school he excelled at wrestling, competing with sighted athletes in the 1987 junior freestyle national championships. Rock climbing came naturally as well. He graduated from Boston College and became a middle school teacher. And he kept reaching higher, kept climbing, until one day in 2001 he stood on top of Mount Everest. That feat landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine, led to an appearance

on *The Tonight Show*, and made him an adventure celebrity and role model. Today, he's a globally sought inspirational speaker, commanding as much as \$75,000 per appearance.

In 2005, Erik cofounded a biennial summit called No Barriers, which aims to help people with disabilities and other adversities to make the hard choices—to break through the boundaries that hold them back. And he kept pushing aside his own boundaries, which eventually brought him to one of the most challenging sports for a blind person: whitewater kayaking.

Blind people navigate using mental maps: Six steps to cross the living room, bathroom door on the left, sink on the right, soap dish at one o'clock. On Everest, that mental map is on an incline; in rock climbing it is vertical. In whitewater, though, the map is fluid, constantly changing.

"It's sensory overload," says Erik. "You are riding an avalanche of moving water that's shifting course, tossing you side to side and trying to flip you. You're paddling into roaring darkness, into chaos. And you are trying to survive that frenzied environment by the sound of your guide's voice commands, the sound of the river, and



River Life: Navigating the slickrock after a storm. At right, Erik jamming in camp with Harlan; paddling Hermit; and sharing a moment with Lonnie.

by what you feel under your boat," he says.

"Blind kayaking is hands down the scariest thing I've ever done. And I've done some pretty scary things."

Paddling has always been difficult for Erik. It has always terrified him. But he persisted, drawn to the thrill of whitewater, the teamwork and systems required, and invigorated by being on rivers with friends and family. He was driven, too, by the challenge, the belief that individual growth requires getting out of one's comfort zone. The hard choices fuel the inner light, and for Erik no choice is more difficult than paddling blind into massive whitewater. So he set an ambitious goal for himself, one that would push aside his personal barriers and make a statement: Erik Weihenmayer would become the first blind person ever to kayak the Grand Canyon.

He started on rivers near his home in Colorado, graduated to the artificial course at the U.S. National Whitewater Center in North Carolina, and built up to big river trips: the Usumacinta between Guatemala and Mexico, and the Río Marañón in Peru. He courted sponsors and the media. His Grand Canyon attempt garnered national headlines, hyped even in the *New York Times*.

Then, in early September 2013, driving home from kayaking

Westwater Canyon on the Colorado, Erik learned that a blind Navy veteran named Lonnie Bedwell had just kayaked the Grand Canyon.

He'd been scooped.

* * *

Seventeen years ago, while turkey hunting near his home in Indiana, one of Lonnie Bedwell's closest friends accidentally shot him in the face. The 12-gauge blast, from just 30 yards away, blinded him instantly. As his friend raced to summon help, the blood in Lonnie's throat began to clot, threatening to choke him to death. Lonnie clawed at the earth, grasped a snapped-off tree branch, and thrust it down his throat to clear an airway. When rescuers finally arrived, Lonnie was motionless, covered in blood and dirt and leaves, barely alive.

Lonnie tells the story one night on the river. He's a small man, maybe 145 pounds wringing wet, bare-chested under a pair of denim overalls. He speaks in a soft country drawl, pronouncing the word "saw" as "sawl." Someone asks about his friend, the man



whose mistake nearly killed him. "Oh, he's still a really good friend," Lonnie says. "We still hunt together."

A former Navy submariner, Lonnie brings a squared-away military mindset to his paddling. He approaches life, and rapids, without too much worry about what might happen. "There is some fear, sure," he says. "But military training helps that. You drill and you drill and you drill so that you are ready for anything." Lonnie found kayaking through Team River Runner, an organization that uses kayaking to help wounded veterans reclaim their lives. Lonnie learned to roll in less than half an hour, then practiced the maneuver more than 1,500 times in the pond on his small farm. Incredibly, before his first Grand Canyon trip with Team River Runner in 2013, Lonnie had paddled whitewater for a total of only two weeks. He was a kayaking savant.

Impressed and inspired, Erik invited Lonnie to join his Grand Canyon expedition. After all, two blind kayakers paddling the Big Ditch would be better

THE CHALLENGE OF LAVA FALLS HAS CONSUMED ERIK'S THOUGHTS FOR YEARS. HE IS IN NO HURRY TO GET THERE.

than one to demonstrate the No Barriers credo: "What's within you is stronger than what's in your way."

Lonnie didn't hesitate. "I was ecstatic to be asked by Erik—by someone who had accomplished as much as Erik has in his life. And I was honored, humbled. It took me about one second to say yes."

So it was on. They'd do it together.

* * *

On the river, Erik wants an unhurried pace to build confidence as the rapids grow in consequence. Though he doesn't talk about it, Lava Falls is in his head;

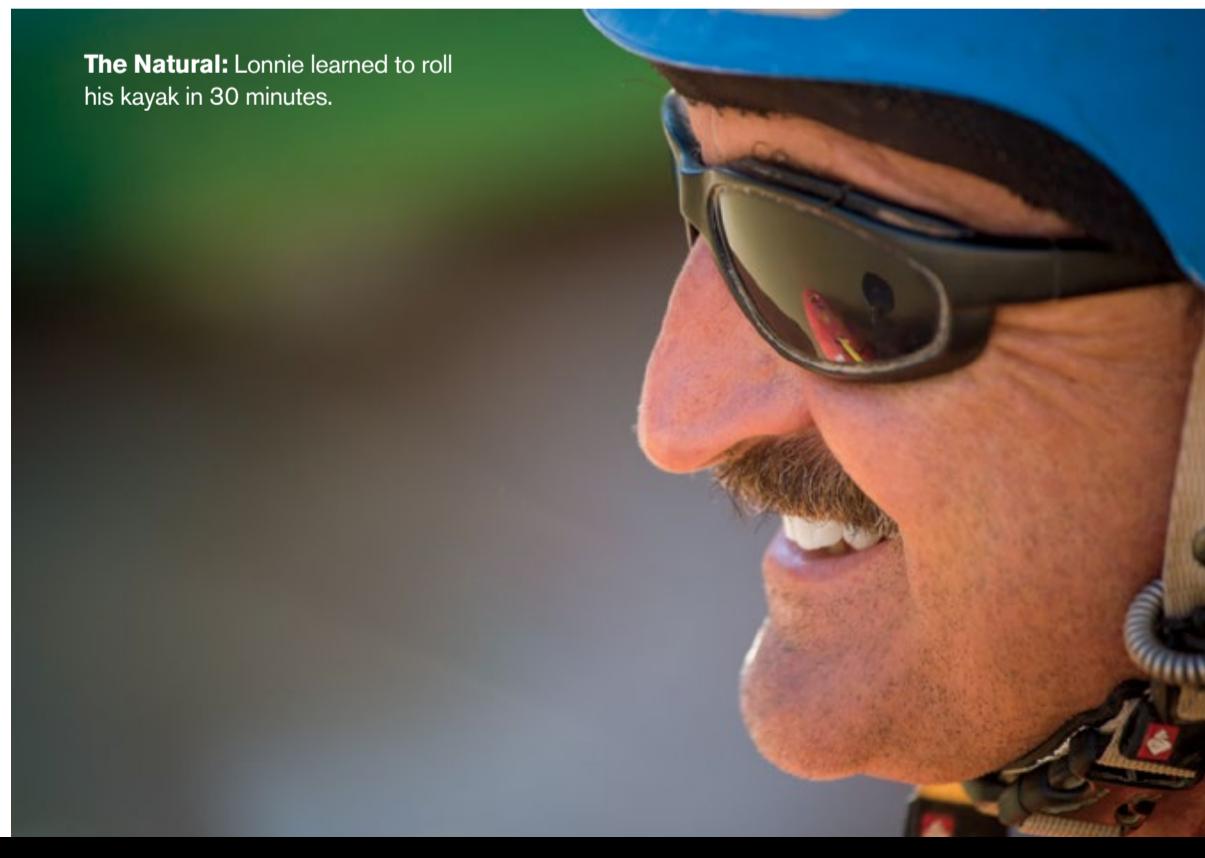
the challenge of that particular rapid has consumed his thoughts for years. He's in no hurry to get there.

The expedition finds a natural cadence. The team scrambles up the Carbon Canyon side-drainage, looping to Lava Chuar Canyon. Erik and Lonnie follow their guides between vertical walls, up creek beds and over boulders. They hike to the Nankoweap Granaries, where ancient Pueblo peoples stored seeds and grain. Inside Redwall Cavern—a 300-foot deep alcove—Erik shows Lonnie how to echolocate by clicking his tongue and listening to the sound bounce off the walls and ceilings.

Nearly every night, safety boater Timmy O'Neill orchestrates jam sessions, with Erik and Harlan strumming guitars. Timmy hands out drums and tambourines, cowbells and triangles; he improvises lyrics, and soon the whole crew is jamming under the moonglow, as Lonnie country swing-dances with raft guides Katie and Kelly.

The eighth day brings the Inner Gorge and the most significant

The Natural: Lonnie learned to roll his kayak in 30 minutes.





Team Bedwell: Lonnie follows Seth Dahl's voice through House Rock Rapid, as safety boater Chris Drew looks on.



Canyon Time: Lonnie and Erik at camp.

whitewater yet: Hance, Sockdolager and Grapevine. Erik wakes feeling nauseous. "Could be nerves, he says," looking as if he's about to hurl.

In 2011, running the Usumacinta at flood levels, Erik encountered immense waters in a confined gorge, with hydraulic features bigger than he or his guides had ever experienced. Deep in the chasm, a mammoth wave upended Erik, and he swam. He latched onto Rob Raker's boat, but the river was so high that the water slammed against the vertical walls and recirculated back toward the middle of the river, pushing them away from shore. Erik clung to the bow of Rob's kayak for what seemed an eternity, and then an enormous whirlpool pulled them in. They spun and spiraled, Erik struggling to hang on as the vortex tugged at his legs, threatening to suck him into an unseen abyss. The experience shook Erik so deeply that he lost his nerve to roll. His default reaction, whenever he flipped, became to swim. It took repeated visits to the relative safety of the National Whitewater Center for him to gradually regain his ability to roll, and restore some measure of confidence. But Erik carries the emotional scar tissue of that day with him in the Grand Canyon.

"Erik's biggest nemesis," says Harlan, "has been the mental aspect. The river is so much more powerful than anything we can comprehend—to kayak well you have to give yourself up to that power. At the top of a big rapid, all those tensions and anxieties can overwhelm Erik, making him tight, rigid, and erratic in his actions. His thoughts and reactions get clouded by doubt and fear."

Hance is long, with a boulder-strewn far right line called "the land of giants." No problem. Both Erik and Lonnie paddle it clean, skirting the big rocks and powering past the holes. Next up, Sockdolager, with its powerful wave trains nearly 20 feet high from trough to crest. Again, they both blow right through, upright and unscathed. Erik is gaining confidence, paddling better, responding to Harlan's commands faster and more efficiently.

The journey is coming together. The radios arrive at Phantom. Harlan and Rob discover that river silt has been clogging the microphones, so they seal the mics with latex finger cots. Problem MacGyver-ed, sort of. The headsets still sound scratchy and garbled, but they'll have to do.

Horn Creek, Hermit, a few flips in the monster waves, but no swims. Late in their second week in the Canyon, Erik and Lonnie hike with their guides up a lush creek bed into Elves Chasm. In an elevated grotto, the guides line them up on the edge of the precipice, then yell, "Jump!" They leap 20 feet from a waterfall into a cooling pool. Lonnie jumps twice. "You just make sure you're headed in the right direction and go for it," he says. "Kind of like kayaking."



Erik stands in the sun on time-hardened rocks, river-right above Lava Falls, scouting his dragon. His heart pounds to the rapid's roar. He's anxious, agitated. He has already paddled 14 miles today, and there's been too much waiting around—first for the scout, then for the film crew to get in position to document his run, then for the light to be just right for filming.

Harlan narrates the approach one last time, as Erik listens, visualizing: *"Relax. Breathe. Be one with the kayak and at peace with the river. Surrender to it. Ease in river-right; stay relaxed and calm in the first boil line. Avoid the Ledge Hole, then charge the V-wave, paddle hard right, but miss the Cheese Grater—that big rock slab jutting out parallel to the last Big Kahuna waves."*

In his boat, Erik slows his breathing, shakes his arms loose, knowing that mental anxiety translates to physical tension. With all his skill and some luck, the wild ride will be over in about 20 seconds and he'll be floating in the tail waters, smiling, victorious, and alive.

A radio squawk breaks the silence.

"Film crew is ready," Erik hears over the coms. "Go for it."

Erik paddles into the sound of cascading water, feels the current grip his hull and whisk him into Lava's tongue. Harlan is tucked in close behind. In his headset Erik channels Harlan's voice, calm and assured, repeating the mantra he's composed for Erik: "We're here, right now, in this moment; nothing else matters. Be clear and calm and concise. Surrender yourself to the river."

Seconds later, chaos. Erik enters too far right and flips in a nasty boil line. Harlan, in faster moving water, slingshots past him, spins his bow upstream, sprints to hold station as Erik attempts his roll. Not how they'd visualized the start of the Grand Canyon's most difficult rapid: Erik upside down and Harlan backwards. But Erik sticks his roll, straightens out, charges through the V-wave. He flips and rolls again, and

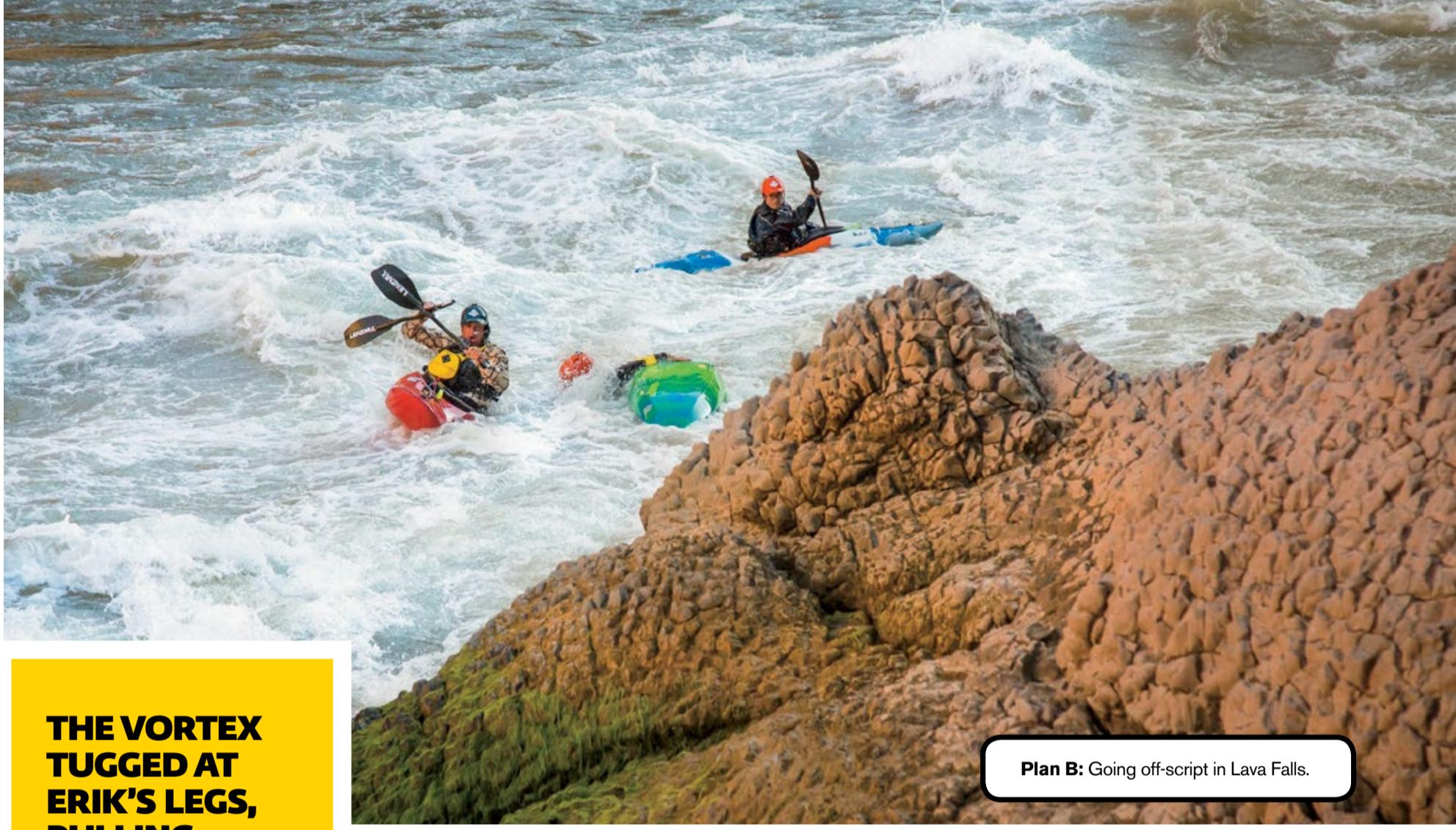
then spirals amid the thunder, now floating backwards into the Big Kahuna tail waves.

Harlan's voice in his ears: "You're good, you're lined up!" Lined up, but backwards. At exactly this moment Harlan punches the meat of the first Big Kahuna wave and it punches back: The force of the water snaps his paddle in two. Suddenly Harlan is upside down in the turbulence, trying to roll up with the remains of his paddle. He's thinking about Erik, hurtling backwards in the roaring darkness, listening for a voice that isn't there.

"My first thoughts," Taney recalled, were "Erik needs me right now. We're a team and I'm not gonna let him down."

**YOU ARE RIDING
AN AVALANCHE
OF MOVING
WATER INTO
ROARING
DARKNESS, INTO
CHAOS. AND
YOU ARE TRYING
TO SURVIVE
THAT FRENZIED
ENVIRONMENT
BY THE SOUND
OF YOUR
GUIDE'S VOICE,
THE SOUND OF
THE RIVER, AND
BY WHAT YOU
FEEL UNDER
YOUR BOAT."**

- ERIK WEIHENMAYER



**THE VORTEX
TUGGED AT
ERIK'S LEGS,
PULLING
HIM INTO
AN UNSEEN
ABYSS. THE
EXPERIENCE
SHOOK HIM
SO DEEPLY
THAT HE LOST
HIS NERVE TO
ROLL.**

Plan B: Going off-script in Lava Falls.

Holding his paddle together as best he can, nearly out of air, Harlan comes up momentarily, sees that Erik has let the demons of darkness and uncertainty and fear into his head. He's pulled his skirt and is swimming, grasping for a rescue. Harlan slips back under water. Erik somehow finds Harlan's boat and clutches desperately for the grab-loop, preventing his guide from rolling up until he realizes he's groping at the bottom of Harlan's kayak, and lets go. Harlan wills himself up on his second roll, barking, "We're good, we're

good, grab me and hang on!" Harlan flounders with his broken paddle as Timmy, right there in support, whisks over, secures Erik, and paddles him to shore.

Absolute, terrifying carnage.

Erik sits at the bottom of the rapid among friends and teammates. He is okay. Drenched and worked, but safe. This isn't what he had envisioned. As he regroups, Lonnie descends, running almost clean, only overturning at the end.

In camp, Erik is pensive. "On journeys like these, you hope for a storybook ending, but ultimately the river tells the story," he reflects. But this isn't how he wants the story to end—with him swimming and being rescued. He's faced with a dilemma: Is the trip a failure because he swam one rapid? Of course not. His mind whirls like the water that just pummeled him. Part of him thinks it's okay, forget about it.





That night, Erik doesn't sleep well. "Son of Lava is a big rapid just outside my tent door; I can hear its roaring thunder all night, speaking to me, and I'm trying to listen to what it is telling me," he muses. "I toss and turn, mulling it over. It would be so easy to just keep going downstream. I mean, really, Lava Falls is over."

But it isn't over.

Early the next morning, Erik gathers his boys: Harlan Taney, Rob Raker, Steve Mace, Skyler Williams and Timmy O'Neil. They carry their boats upstream toward the top of Lava Falls, wordlessly bushwhacking through the thick tamarisk scrub. This time, without all the scouting and waiting in the heat, Erik feels better. Still scared, but clearer now. They slip into their boats and start ferrying up the eddyline. Instantly the turbulence flips Erik. He rolls right back up, but doubt and fear grip him hard, and he again questions whether he really needs to do this. He summons a mantra he tells his children when they are facing something frightening and uncertain. He calls it his open heart policy. "It's about opening your heart, when trying new or scary things, to trust. Trusting the people around you, trusting that you will emerge on the other side stronger; it's about putting your faith in that trust and then committing, just ... giving it a whirl." Erik breathes deep, recites his "open heart policy" to himself, aims his kayak downstream, and gives it a whirl.

There is no turning back.

Erik flips in the entrance wave, but rolls back up. He flips again in the exact spot he'd rolled the day before, but this time, instead of succumbing to the demons and pulling his sprayskirt, Erik Weihenmayer hangs on. Upside down in the maelstrom, he remains calm. Surrendering his fear to the river, he conjures everything inside him, and sticks his roll. He paddles out the bottom of Big Kahuna with Harlan's voice in his ears: "You're through it! You're through it!" Then, Erik hears the hoots and yips from his team, those friends in whom he'd put his trust, to whom he had opened his heart.

He has done it.

"What he did right there," says Harlan "was truly impressive. He confronted his biggest fear, and it slapped him down hard; then he came back to confront it again." He gave himself up to the river and transcended fear, overcoming his mental barriers. That act epitomizes what Erik claims and what he stands for—he lived his motto, showing that "what's within you is stronger than what's in your way."

On September 27, 277 miles after putting in at Lee's Ferry, Erik Weihenmayer and Lonnie Bedwell round the final river bend of their journey and approach the beach at Pearce Ferry. At last, there is only the sound of their collective paddle strokes cleaving the smooth water in unison. Calling out Erik's final directions, Harlan's voice breaks with emotion, and the other guides choke up too. They are moved by the totality of the three-week expedition: the bonds of brotherhood created, the team's successful completion of a vision and a dream. Two blind men have kayaked one of the world's great rivers, have fueled each other and learned from each other, their internal lights flaming and igniting those flickering in all of us. And partly the emotion is the unexpected arrival of Erik's wife Ellen and his teenage children Emma and Arjun, who have appeared unannounced to surprise him, and are now rushing barefoot down the beach with their arms outspread to embrace him.



Redemption Ride: Erik in the throat of Lava Falls.

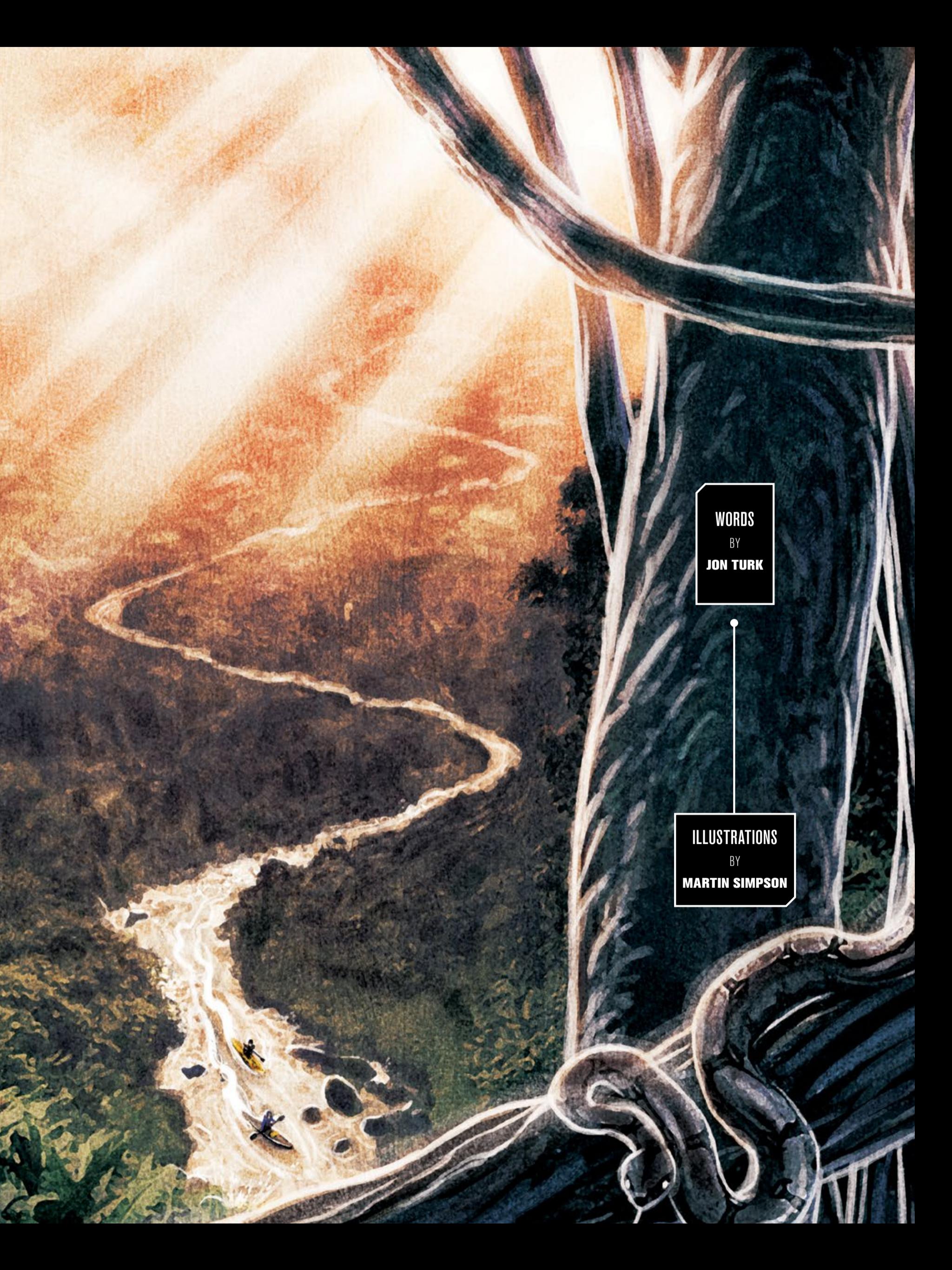


AT LEAST WE SHOWED UP

*Facebook, blowguns
and doubt in the
Venezuelan rainforest*

The remoteness was
so complete that it
felt tactile, like cold
or hunger, or for me
like a lover's touch.

My kayak accelerated
on the green tongue
of dark-flowing water
toward the horizon
line, outlined by
bouncing splashies
that leapt out of
invisibility and mystery.

The background image is a high-angle aerial photograph of a river system. On the left, a wide river flows through a valley with dense green forests. A small town or cluster of buildings is visible near the river's edge. In the center, a long, thin bridge stretches across the water. The right side of the image shows a dense forest with many tall, thin trees, their branches reaching upwards. The overall scene is a mix of natural landscapes and human-made infrastructure.

WORDS
BY
JON TURK

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
MARTIN SIMPSON



There had been a brief moment of—Disbelief? Incredulity? Anger?—when my partner had sped away, back upstream in the motorized dugout, the blue-gray exhaust of the Evinrude 75 momentarily displacing the smell of orchids and jungle greenery. As the smoke slowly dissipated into the vastness, I took stock: *I am utterly alone in the Venezuelan rainforest, in an unfamiliar kayak, without a lifejacket, or stow-floats.*

And then:

Yes. I'm exactly where I want to be, where I have trained myself to be. Enjoying the focus of vulnerability.

How did I get here? Like so many things these days, it started with an email:

*From: Ender Luis Serrano Montiel
Hola Jon. I love your work, your passion and advocacy for the Environment. I'm 41 years old*

from The Beautiful and Unique Venezuela. I'm a Stand up Paddler. I'm a flexibility and stretching specialist. Love Yoga, Ballet and Contemporary Dance, Taichi, Meditation ... I'm planning some adventures in the Guyana Highlands. Angels Falls area. Is the Venezuelan Amazon. I used to live there ... The Indian Leaders r waiting for me to help them to raise awareness for the Environment and Global Water Crisis. I'm ready to hear or learn anything from u Professor.

Hmmm, I thought: It sounds groovy and all, but I'm not sure what this stranger is asking me to do. Yet, I am a writer, and a door was opening into an unfamiliar environment. So I said 'yes,' despite the uncertainty of traveling with a stranger who has no expedition experience in a lawless region rumored to be full of ruthless, well-armed gold miners.

I've taken similar chances before. Some were positive in a life-changing way while others were disasters. Looking back at it all, other than the ego thing, it hardly made a difference whether an expedition ended in failure or success. I was out there, regardless. In 2011, Erik Boomer and I were trapped on the northeast coast of Ellesmere



Island in the Canadian Arctic by moving ice that was smashing against cliffs, exploding crystals into the air, and threatening to crush any kayak that might venture into the mayhem (C&K May 2012). Maybe I'm not that good at saving the world, but for me, expeditions are about feeling the world. And watching that ice, I emotionally internalized the scientific fact that this glistening, frigid ice in the polar north is linked like partners in a dance with the hot and humid rainforest, moderating temperatures so our planet remains habitable.

With Boomer, I had felt the wing beat of the northern partner and now, despite all of the obvious uncertainty of this brief, enigmatic invitation, I wanted to visit the southern partner, dressed in greenness, infested with poisonous vipers, and dripping with rain.

So here I was in a vast roadless region of southeastern Venezuela, on the Caroni River within the territory of the Pemon tribe, adjacent to the even greater expanse of the Brazilian Amazon. And I was suddenly alone, accelerating toward the horizon line. As I expected, or at least hoped, the run

was no big deal. It was the rainy season and the river was nearly in flood, so there were no rocks to avoid, only weird, unpredictable, deep-water whirlpools and migrating mid-channel eddylines, appearing and disappearing like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, or like a fer-de-lance in the forest: harmless if you don't step on it, but deadly if you do. In any case, I powered through, and broke free into calm water with barely a splash on my face.

I continued downstream, still alone, enjoying the solitude, and then navigated a second rapid which was easier than the first. Finally Ender showed up in the motorized dugout and approached me with an innocent smile, as if he hadn't broken the universal and most precious bond between expedition partners: that you watch out for and protect one another, that you attack a real or metaphorical polar bear with your paddle, your camera, or even your bare fists if necessary, because the partnership is life itself. In fairness, the breach wasn't entirely Ender's fault; the driver of the dugout had merely decided to speed back to town in order to con more gas money out of him.

Ender chose the SUP because he loves the feeling of

standing on water. "The view is beautiful," he says. "It is a full-body workout using every muscle in your body. I enjoy the rhythm one creates while paddling. It is like a dance. And I love the fact I can take my naps while floating. It is so versatile." I was traveling in a TRAK collapsible kayak because it disassembles for air travel or long portages, and paddles efficiently in both flatwater and turbulence.

As the journey unfolded, I realized that the global water issue that Ender wrote about revolved around pollution from gold mining. A few days below the rapid, we left the broad Caroni and paddled upstream on a minor tributary, which weaved beneath the overhead canopy, clogged with moss-covered logs leaning overhead, and infused in mist and semidarkness. I kept a vigilant eye overhead to be sure that what I thought was a branch wasn't really a poisonous snake hanging in the air, hunting insects and birds, who in its fear, might take a bite out of me. This was the kind of place where, in the documentary imagery of the 1960s, you might see shrunken heads on sticks—an implicit warning to outsiders. The people living in this part of the Amazon had first contact with Europeans only within my lifetime. A beam of sunshine filtered through the canopy like the light in a medieval cathedral. No, this place wasn't like a church, built on the backs and blood of peasants. The forest is the church, the holy place of our deep ancestry. Then, I put my paddle down and listened to the unmistakable beat, not of jungle drums, but of a diesel engine. The pulsating heart of a highly polluting gold-mining operation.

Ender and I located the motor, which was driving a powerful pump, and we followed the attached pipe into the jungle on a narrow trail where prints of heavy boots and bare feet were impressed into the mud.

European forays into the Caroni region were rare until prospectors discovered rich gold deposits in the 1930s. Then the rush was on. In those early days, gold mining meant an influx of armed foreigners who destroyed forests and traditional hunting grounds. As recently as 1993, miners attacked locals in a Wounded Knee-type massacre, hacking women and children with machetes and burning homes and gardens. But paradoxically, in addition to death and mayhem, this advanced phalanx of civilization also imported the dream of European consumerism. By the time of our 2013 descent, this particular mine was a small family cooperative, operated by friendly Pemon villagers trying to earn hard currency to buy stuff, like sewing needles and iPhones, that most of us take for granted.

Three men wielding chainsaws were cutting a swath of



I stood, lost in my own non-thoughts, shirtless and shivering in that cathedral lighting, entombed in the Earth's innards.

forest in the vastness of this equatorial land, while three others were burning the slash in smoky fires. The heart of the mining operation was two men with rubber boots and heavy hydraulic hoses. They stood in a muddy pit, directing streams of high-pressure water into the deep banks and dislodging the mud, which ran into a small creek. The men had clogged the creek with sticks and brush, like a beaver dam, to slow the water, so the nuggets and flakes of yellow gold and glistening diamonds would settle out to be collected. Then the muddy, untreated

wastewater was diverted directly into the river. I photographed the operation, mindful that I was here to raise awareness for the Environment and Global Water Crisis. At the same time, I was also mindful that the electrical contacts on my camera are made of gold, so that, even if I wasn't standing in the mud with a hose, I am part of the supply and demand chain.

Back on the Caroni, the river quickly grew in volume until we lost the intimacy of the jungle. We continued downstream in the blazing morning heat and the torrential afternoon downpours until we reached the

bustling trading village of Uriman. Ender and I decided to hike onto the plateau above the jungle, cross a drainage divide, and then start paddling again on a small, more intimate creek, back to the Caroni. It was a detour for the sake of the detour, to explore the country rather than to arrive at any particular destination. We hired three porters to help us with our loads and together hiked through the jungle, forded a clear, flowing stream, and climbed into the exposed sunlight of the Guyana Plateau, also called Gran Sabana—a wide grassland with occasional patches of forest beneath towering sandstone mesas called *tepui*. The ecosystem looked so much like that of Africa that I almost imagined zebras and lions.

The first night, the five of us stopped at a family settlement consisting of four small buildings made of sticks and grass. We hung our hammocks under an open-sided palapa, and bought an unripe watermelon from our hosts. These people had chosen to live apart from the village, surviving mainly on *casabe* (cassava bread) made from the native yucca, supplemented with game they shot with a rusty 16-gauge shotgun and fish that they hunted with bows and arrows.

We hiked for another day through a heavy equatorial downpour, primordial in its ferocity. The rain lay on the laterite soil, turning the plateau into a vast shallow lake, slippery to walk across and too shallow to paddle in. By the end of the day, we reached a small village of about 10 houses, adjacent to a crude airstrip. Once we were settled beneath the chief's palapa, our porters collected their money and abandoned us. Their own settlements were nearby, and from the beginning they never had any intention of traveling over the mountain pass beyond their homes.

Ender and I hadn't established the team unity and perseverance required to suffer, and we had too much stuff anyway. So rather than hike over the pass on our own, we decided to charter a plane. The following morning I lay in my hammock, watching the pulse of the village: a girl-mother caring for her baby, chickens scratching, termites hatching, and young men going off to hunt. Looking above me, I saw a long, straight, hollow stick—a

blowgun—tucked into the thatch.

I stared at the blowgun, reflecting on how recently the people of this town—and all of us, really—had emerged from the Stone Age. At the same time, Ender switched on the satellite phone and opened a connection with that seemingly incomprehensible universe of metal, concrete, and electronics beyond the horizon. Soon he reached a bush pilot who promised to shuttle us over the mountain. The next day we flew to Kamarata, a larger village consisting of 75 houses and a few stores, just east of Auyan Tepui, the source of Kerepakupai Vená, known by Westerners as Angel Falls, the highest cataract in the world, with a free-flowing plunge of 2,648 feet. As we walked from the airstrip to town, I noticed a mission church and a cellphone tower on an adjacent hill.

Joseph Campbell famously said that when people first built cities, the church was the largest structure. Then as human societies evolved and became politically

I contemplated escaping into the whitewater with imaginary arrows and blowgun darts whizzing overhead. But that was needless romanticism.

more complex, the government building became larger than the churches. By the mid-20th century, the grandest edifices in the urban landscape were the banks and centers of finance. Here in Kamarata, the cellphone tower dominates the skyline, soaring over the mission steeple.

The local chief explained that a year ago, some Venezuelan rock climbers were climbing a tepui when they pulled a common anchor and all plummeted to their deaths. Because these unfortunate youths had made a sequence of bad mistakes on vertical rock, it proved, beyond a shadow of doubt, that Ender and I were also incompetent. Therefore the tribal council would not allow us to paddle downstream, where we would undoubtedly get munched by the jungle, and cause all sorts of headaches for the locals. It's a logic string that is impossible to refute.

So here we were, two hours by Cessna from the nearest road, unable to proceed. Ender made an angry speech claiming that we were important, intrepid explorers, and they couldn't treat us this way. The chief's wife said a few words in Pemon to a young boy who was sitting in the corner, and he raced outside. Moments later, two young warriors walked in silently, and sat

CONT. ON 63 ➔



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ON WIND & WAVES

Kayakers sail to surf British Columbia's tidal races

WORDS BY CONOR MIHELL PHOTOS BY FREDRIK MARMSATER

Chris Bensch is no sailor, but he felt pretty sure the 34-foot trimaran *Lung-Ta* was in trouble. Topside, chaos reigned as the sails ballooned in 25-knot winds and skipper Matt Nelson barked orders to reel in the spinnaker and reef the main. Saltwater sprayed in the air, battering the sea kayaks strapped to the vessel's outer hulls. Bensch had signed on to crew the tiny vessel north into the Strait of Georgia, lured by the promise of kayaking the world-class tidal races between mainland British Columbia and Vancouver Island. Now he could only stand by as Nelson, Nick Scoville and Fred Marmsater, all experienced sailors, scrambled to keep the boat under control.



Waves for Days: Chris Bensch carving at Okisollo (top) and Surge Narrows.



The mission to harness the wind to reach some of the best paddling destinations in the Pacific Northwest was the brainchild of Nelson, who took up sea kayaking after spending three years exploring the U.S. West Coast, Baja and Hawaii in a 28-foot sailboat. Countless hours staring at empty horizons convinced Nelson that the sea is most interesting where it meets the land, and the best way to experience that dynamic interface is in a kayak. But even as he cut his teeth as a kayak instructor in Washington's San Juan Islands and fell in love with paddling, sailing was never far from Nelson's mind. In 2012 he bought *Lung-Ta* and began the monumental task of retrofitting her for long-distance travel—at one point living out of the trimaran's tiny cabin for a year and a half.

As he worked, he dreamed of combining his two passions. With little provocation, Nelson would tell his friends about his evolving plan to circumnavigate Vancouver Island without using any fossil fuels, stopping to play in sea kayaks at tidal rapids and surf breaks along the way. He called the idea Sail2Surf.

"I live in a prime area that offers strong tidal currents, world-class standing waves and amazing outer-coast surf breaks," says Nelson. "They're all accessible through an incredible sailing environment."

His vision resonated with Marmsater, a paddler and photographer who learned to sail while growing up in Sweden, and Scoville, an ex-sailboat racer turned rough-water sea kayaker. The promise of high-seas adventure and deserted surf waves was enough to lure Bensch, a hotshot paddler and instructor from Portland, Ore. But the first challenge was getting *Lung-Ta* shipshape—reinforcing the hull and replacing the mast and rigging—an overwhelming endeavor that Nelson bankrolled singlehanded. "It was a classic Catch-22," he says. "I had no case for sponsorship until the boat was functional."

That didn't stop him from committing to a labor of passion that seemed at times like a never-ending project. "A lot of outdoor athletes feel the need to justify what they're doing," notes Nelson. "It has to be burly. It has to one-up what was done last year. But the reality is, you just have to do what motivates you."

Nelson finally announced that the boat was ready last spring, though testing the reconfigured vessel was still a work in progress. When the foursome gathered on Orcas Island, Wash., in late June, Nelson had sailed *Lung-Ta* only twice. The team wisely chose a less ambitious route for the shakedown: instead of lapping Vancouver Island, they would sail north to Quadra Island, where anchorages could be found close to the currents and standing waves of Surge Narrows and Okisollo Rapids. Marmsater and Bensch would leave the boat after 10 days, and Nelson and Scoville would continue for another three weeks' exploration. "With the new rig, it was somewhat touch and go," says Marmsater. "We didn't want to push the boat too hard."



In many ways, the 100-mile passage from the San Juans to Quadra Island followed the same rhythm of a sea kayak trip. The sails were raised with the first cups of coffee at dawn, and stayed up until sunset. The lightweight, sporty trimaran was able to make good headway in the slightest wind, and, except for a few tricky moorages, Nelson kept to his promise of travel without a motor. Generally, the team averaged three or four miles per hour—about the same pace as they would in their kayaks. And just like a paddling journey, sailing demanded constant awareness of weather patterns. Solid chart and compass skills were needed to keep the vessel on track and out of harm's way. Camping gear remained stowed while Nelson, Scoville, Marmsater and Bensch relished the camaraderie of co-occupying the below-deck cabin, which Nelson compares in size to "an oddly misshapen four-person tent, with room for only one person to stand up."

"It was four dudes sleeping on top of one another," laughs Marmsater. "We were misplacing stuff all the time—everything from



sugar to olive oil to matches to paddling gear. The boat has tons of storage space in all sorts of dark nooks and crannies. It seemed like we were always saying, 'Where did I put that?'

On the morning of Day Five, the crew awoke off of Lasqueti Island. Spirits were high with the hopes of reaching Quadra by nightfall, but Nelson observed the harbingers of strong winds written in the clouds. With the crew eager to get to paddling, Nelson followed the seafarers' adage, "A ship in the harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." He lifted anchor and set the sails, confident that *Lung-Ta* could handle the blow.

The wind started to overwhelm the boat on a downwind tack, and with Scoville at the helm, Nelson called on Marmsater and Bensch to reef the sails. The spinnaker tangled around the forestay and, after a few panicked moments when the boat wallowed dangerously, the crew wrestled it in. Crisis averted, *Lung-Ta* rocketed forward under minimal sails, careening down the wave faces at over 15 miles per hour—remarkable speed for a sailboat. Dressed in his drysuit and swallowing hard to battle the queasiness in his gut, Bensch was exhilarated. "I knew we were really hauling," he says, "but I thought this was normal. The other guys were like, 'Wow, I've never sailed this fast before.' It turned out to be one of the coolest moments of the trip. We were surfing while sailing."

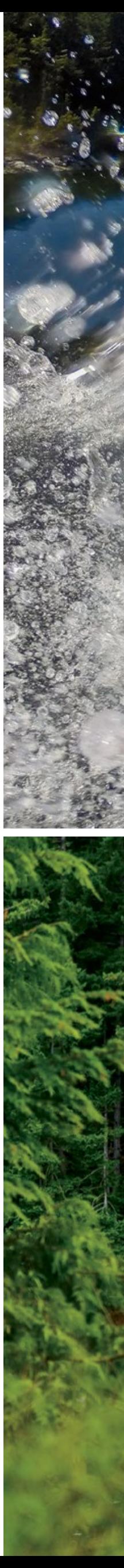
On the flooding tide, Okisollo Rapids churns like a Class IV river, with a lead-in wave that grows as large as a semi-truck and oscillates between glassy, curling and foamy depending on the tidal cycle. Normally, boaters must paddle six miles to get here from the nearest road on Quadra Island. Nelson's dream was fully realized when he anchored *Lung-Ta* within a mile of the surf spot—an easy paddle in the team's play-specific, P&H Hammer and Aries sea kayaks.

Their timing was perfect: A new moon meant five days of peak flow. "We surfed as much as we wanted everyday," says Nelson. "There was no waiting in the eddy in this beautiful part of the world."

For Bensch, a veteran ocean break surfer with no experience in tide races, Okisollo was the peak experience—the ultimate way to cap off the mission to get here. Though it was his first time surfing a tidal rapid, Bensch quickly figured out a strategy. "You want to drop into the steep, dark spot, just like in an ocean-surf situation," he says. "That's the power pocket, where you can harness the energy to make maneuvers. It was intimidating at first—until I realized that dealing with the whirlpools and boils when you fall off the wave is far more intense."

As rewarding as it was to paddle sea kayaks in these dynamic waters, it was the quiet elements of the journey—slowing down, disconnecting from the rest of the world and living in the moment—that made the journey most special. All too soon, 10 days had passed and Marmsater and Bensch left the boat to hitchhike and scramble to coordinate ferries and bus rides back to Washington state. Meanwhile, Nelson and Scoville settled further into the groove. They continued to pilot *Lung-Ta* through the remote, island-choked fjords of central British Columbia.

Beneath the snow-capped peaks that fringe these hidden arms of the Pacific Northwest, it was as though Nelson and Scoville had sailed off the map. They found secluded anchorages, removed their kayaks and felt tiny gliding beneath towering granite cliffs. Then, as twilight fell and seals surfaced around their boats, the friends paddled back to their floating home, cracked beers and dreamed about the next day, when they would do it all over again.





DESTINATIONS



Sailor's Delight: Matt Nelson surfing at Okisollo, and a safe anchorage at Cortes Island.





BOMBER GEAR®

BOMBER GEAR

| CITY : GREENVILLE, SC : STATE |

| WORLD WIDE WEB : BOMBERGEAR.COM : ADDRESS |

| LAND : 888-525-2925 : LINE |



GAULEY DRY TOP

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Bombtech 2.5
PRICE: \$249.99

Also available in short sleeve, pants, and suits for men and women, Bomber Gear's mid-level dry wear series provides performance, breathability and ergonomic fit in a variety of vibrant color options. Constructed from durable, breathable, and waterproof Bombtech 2.5 ply fabric with 4-way stretch neoprene on the neck.



PALGUIN DRY TOP

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Polartec®
NeoShell®
PRICE: \$399.99

Palguin is the first dry wear series in paddlesports history to utilize proven Polartec® NeoShell® 3-ply fabric. It is extraordinarily breathable and waterproof, and creates an unprecedented system of all-day comfort with Bomber Gear base layers. Features reinforced panels in high wear areas. Also available: Palguin dry suit and pants.



EDISTO SPLASH TOP

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Bombtech 2.0
PRICE: \$119.99

Lightweight, waterproof and breathable, the Edisto Series' Bombtech 2.0 ply fabric makes for the perfect splash wear on warm days in cool water. The top features an adjustable zippered neck that's stylish on and off the water. Also available: men's and women's tops and pants.



TAHOE THERMAL TOP

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Polartec®
Power Dry™
PRICE: \$69.99

A thermal mid-layer, the Tahoe Series is the key to staying comfortable all year-around. Mid-weight Polartec® Power Dry™ with odor resistant technology and breathable underarm panels retains heat, wet or dry, and wicks moisture away from the body. Also available: union suit, men's and women's tops and pants.



BAJA UV PROTECTION TOP

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: Polartec®
Power Grid™
PRICE: \$44.99

Perfect as a base layer or alone, the ergonomic Baja Series constructed from Polartec® Power Grid™ is designed to keep your skin dry and protected from harmful UV rays, offering 50+ UPF and odor resistant technology in a silkweight fabric. Also available: men's and women's short and long sleeve tops.



GAULEY DRY SUIT

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: Bombtech 2.5
PRICE: \$749.99

- Bomber Gear's mid-level dry wear series provides performance, breathability and ergonomic fit in a variety of vibrant color options. Constructed from durable, breathable, and waterproof Bombtech 2.5 ply fabric with 4-way stretch neoprene on the neck. Also available: men's & women's dry tops, dry pants, and men's dry suit.



ONEIDA PADDLE SUIT

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Bombtech 2.5
PRICE: \$599.99

- Ideal for kayak fishing and canoeing, the Oneida Series offers versatile, bombproof performance for a variety of climates. Constructed from our durable, breathable, and waterproof Bombtech 2.5 ply fabric, this series features a latex-free neck for comfort and ease of use. Also available in a long sleeve semi-dry top.



PALGUIN DRY SUIT

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Polartec® NeoShell®
PRICE: \$999.99

- Bomber Gear® and Polartec® have partnered to deliver the most innovative dry wear in paddlesports history with the Palguin Series featuring Polartec® NeoShell®, an extraordinarily breathable, waterproof 3-ply fabric. Dry suit features reinforced panels in high wear areas and creates an unprecedented system of all-day comfort with our base layers.



TAHOE THERMAL UNION SUIT

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Polartec® Power Dry™
PRICE: \$109.99

- A thermal mid-layer, the Tahoe Series is the key to staying comfortable all year-around. Mid-weight Polartec® Power Dry® with odor resistant technology and breathable underarm panels retains heat, wet or dry, and wicks moisture away from the body. Also available: men's and women's tops and pants.

VANGUARD SPRAYSKIRT

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Toray Entrant HB tunnel, Cordura combing
PRICE: \$134.99

- Bomber Gear's high-end touring sprayskirt, the Vanguard utilizes 4-layer waterproof, breathable Toray Entrant HB fabric on the tunnel, Cordura reinforced combing, and a 9.5MM shock cord rand. Also features taped, stitched, and glued seams, a dual-adjustable waist with mesh pocket, side lash loops, and a knee bar grab handle.





EXTRASPORT

| CITY : OLD TOWN, ME : STATE |

| WORLD WIDE WEB : EXTRASPORT.COM : ADDRESS |

| LAND : 800.852.9257 : LINE |



EON

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: 500D
Cordura® Nylon
PRICE: \$129.99

A thoughtful PFD for the passionate female paddler. With the Women's AirComfortSystem™ and the performance of Cordura® fabric. Featuring waist belt, D-ring front and rear, adjustable shoulder and side straps, reflective piping front and back, 2 Fleece-lined hand warmer pockets, 2 Napoleon chest pockets with zips, and 2 pleated pockets.



EON

MEN'S
MATERIALS: 500D
Cordura® Nylon
PRICE: \$129.99

A thoughtful PFD for the passionate paddler. With the AirComfortSystem™ and the performance of Cordura® fabric. Featuring waist belt, D-ring front and rear, adjustable shoulder and side straps, reflective piping front and back, 2 Fleece-lined hand warmer pockets, 2 Napoleon chest pockets with zips, 2 pleated pockets and more.



EON ANGLER

UNISEX
MATERIALS: 500D
Cordura® Nylon
PRICE: \$129.99

A serious PFD for serious fishing. AirComfortSystem™ and Cordura® fabric. Featuring waist belt, Velcro patch, 2 VHF radio pockets, adjustable shoulder and side straps, zippered pocket with D-ring, reflective piping front and back, 4 Hypalon patches for retractors, 5 D-rings and 2 elastic retention clips, 8 pockets and more.



EVOLVE

MEN'S
MATERIALS: 240D Ripstop
Nylon with 200D Nylon
PRICE: \$99.99

A growing sense of adventure and confidence on the water deserves a PFD to match. Clean styling matched with our AirComfortSystem™. Featuring waist belt, D-ring front and rear, adjustable shoulder and side straps, reflective piping front and back, and 2 chest pockets with zips Fleece-lined for hand warming.



EVOLVE

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: 240D Ripstop
Nylon with 200D Nylon
PRICE: \$99.99

A women's growing sense of adventure and confidence on the water deserves a PFD to match. Clean styling matched with our Women's AirComfortSystem™. Featuring waist belt, D-ring front and rear, adjustable shoulder and side straps, reflective piping front and back, and 2 chest pockets with zips Fleece-lined for hand warming.



LEVEL SIX

| CITY : OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CA : PROVINCE/COUNTRY |

| WORLD WIDE WEB : LEVELSIX.COM : ADDRESS |

| LAND : 613.274.0144 : LINE |



NEO-WAVE SUP

MEN'S & WOMEN'S

MATERIALS: 0.5 Neoprene

PRICE: \$109.99

- The Neo Wave Sup jacket is a must have piece of gear. Made from 0.5 petroleum free neoprene with a soft wicking inner. The relaxed fit of the Neo-Wave Sup Jacket is great for on the water, off the water, sea kayaking, SUPing, canoeing or driving to the put in.



EXCURSION

UNISEX

MATERIALS: 2.5-ply waterproof breathable, Exhaust

PRICE: \$79.99

- The Excursion is a performance touring or sea kayaking spray skirt with the added bonus of being constructed from our eXhaust 2.5 ply waterproof breathable nylon fabric. This skirt will keep the elements out while at the same time letting your lower body breath and remain comfortable on those long treks.

ORION

UNISEX

MATERIALS: 2.5-ply waterproof breathable, Exhaust

PRICE: \$649.99

- The Orion Drysuit is lightweight and designed for comfort. Latex ankle and wrists keep the water out. An adjustable gusseted neoprene neck includes a stow away hood. Designed for Sea kayaking or SUP paddling when immersion is unlikely but the added security and comfort of a dry suit is good to have.



FULL MONTY

MEN'S

MATERIALS: Nylon outer/
Neoprene inner

PRICE: \$124.99

- The Full Monty has a super-stretch neoprene ¾ length inner short. The high neoprene back protects your lower back and kidneys. This short adds protection, warmth and comfort. The rugged and quick drying outer short makes it perfect for all paddling conditions.

SUPERIOR 2.0

MEN'S

MATERIALS: 3-ply waterproof
breathable, Exhaust

PRICE: \$349.99

- Level Six designs for function. 3 ply exhaust waterproof breathable material and a cozy fleece lined kangaroo pocket are just a couple of unique features. A tall neck closure and with die cut breath ventilation are designed for comfort and function for the roughest of conditions...and the sweetest conditions.





STOHLQUIST WATERWARE

| CITY : ARLINGTON, WA : STATE |

| WORLD WIDE WEB : STOHLQUIST.COM : ADDRESS |

| LAND : 360.435.6696 : LINE |

DESCENT

MEN'S

MATERIALS: 500D Cordura

PRICE: \$229.95

- The ultimate Type-V rescue vest, and the first choice of many whitewater boaters and sea kayakers alike. The Wrapture™ torso provides a low-profile and comfortable fit not found in other vests.

- A big front pocket, mesh beverage pocket, reinforced portage shoulder panels, and suspended shoulders are included.



KAHUNA

UNISEX

MATERIALS: 500D
Cordura Nylon

PRICE: \$129.95

- A high float, low-profile vest for running really big water. This high-float vest offers our Graded Sizing, so that each size offers the lowest possible footprint. Offering 18-22 lbs. of buoyancy, this vest offers the extra level of protection that is needed when running big, fast moving water.

EDGE

UNISEX

MATERIALS: Ripstop Nylon

PRICE: \$99.95

- The Edge is a great all-around vest for SUP paddles and whitewater boaters. Super low-profile, and very high mobility make this a great all-day paddling vest. Our Graded Sizing and Wrapture™ torso provide a perfect fit on a wide range of paddlers. A great choice for smaller paddlers.



COASTER

MEN'S

MATERIALS: Ripstop Nylon

PRICE: \$99.95

- Designed with today's higher seat backs in mind, the Coaster offers increased back coverage and a thin foam back panel to reduce interference with high seats. Also featured is Stohlquist's Graded Sizing; each size provides the lowest footprint and maximum mobility possible. Available in the women's specific Misty model also.



CONTOUR

UNISEX

MATERIALS: Ripstop Nylon

PRICE: \$119.95

- This low-profile design provides unbeatable comfort and mobility for SUP paddlers, recreational boaters, or kayak anglers looking for minimal coverage. The Contour is very easy to adjust and swim with when inflated, and is simple to rearm and repack. The zippered pocket will hold your car key and debit card.





COREHEATER

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Neoprene
PRICE: \$84.95

The 4-way stretch 1mm neoprene Coreheaters block out the water, wind, and harmful UV rays to provide you with warmth and protection from the elements. The 1mm neoprene is warm enough to wear alone on cool days, but light enough to wear on warmer days in cold waters.



RAPID 3MM PANT

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Neoprene, 3mm
Four-way Stretch
PRICE: \$99.95

The Rapid 3mm super-stretch pants are perfect for SUP, or for pairing with a drytop on the river. The 3mm neoprene provides excellent thermal protection, and waterproof seams help to minimize water exchange. Reinforced SupraTex panels protect the knees and seat for added durability.

RAPID JOHN

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Neoprene, 3mm
Four-way Stretch
PRICE: \$159.95

Perfect for rafting, kayaking, or SUP, this 3mm super-stretch neoprene jane/john provides excellent thermal protection, and features waterproof seams throughout. Reinforced SupraTex knees and seat for added durability and abrasion resistance. Relief zippers feature elastic zipper locks and non-corrosive YKK zippers. Available in men's and women's styles.



RAPID 1MM CAPRI

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: Neoprene, 1mm
Four-way Stretch
PRICE: \$89.95

Great for SUP, this 1mm super-stretch capri pant provides just the right amount of thermal protection, while completely blocking wind and spray. The super-stretch fabric and flatlock seams provide excellent all-day comfort. The perfect capri for cool mornings on the water.

FREEPLAY

WOMEN'S
MATERIALS: Nylon, 4-Layer
Twin-Sensor™
PRICE: \$349.00

A women's specific version of our best selling river running drytop. The women's Freeplay features soft Duraseal™ latex neck & wrist gaskets and our 4-layer Twin-Sensor™ waterproof/breathable fabric throughout. The women's cut offers excellent mobility and layering room for female paddlers.





SHIFT

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Nylon, 3-Layer
Rampart™
PRICE: \$949.95

- Offering unmatched flexibility, the Shift allows you to fully vent your drysuit, while still providing you with complete wind & splash protection. The Captive Zip™ self-entry makes for simple donning/doffing. While it looks like separate jacket and pants, the Shift is actually a 100% dry, one-piece suit.



AMP

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Nylon, 4-Layer
Twin-Sensor™
PRICE: \$829.95

- The Amp features Stohlquist's highly breathable 4-layer Twin-Sensor™ fabric, and softer Duraseal™ latex neck and wrist gaskets which redefine drysuit comfort. Whether whitewater boating or touring, the Amp provides the weatherproof protection and comfort you need. The Amp is also available in a women's specific cut.



VAPOR

MEN'S
MATERIALS: Polyester,
PolarTec® Powerdry®
PRICE: \$139.95

- This PolarTec® Powerdry® fleece drysuit liner provides exceptional warmth and superior wicking action. The double-collar zipperless entry system reduces bulk under your drysuit, while providing greater stretch and eliminating cold spots. The 5.0oz fleece provides great thermal protection, but the Vapor is designed to accommodate additional layering.



BOHDI WATERSHOES

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Nyloprene
PRICE: \$29.99

- The perfect watershoe for those who do not need the coverage and warmth of a traditional neoprene bootie. Great for recreational paddlers and SUPers enjoying warm days on the water. Features include an ergonomically shaped footbed, molded removable EVA insole, mesh drainage vents, and a sticky non-slip TPR outsole.



TIDELINE BOOTS

UNISEX
MATERIALS: Neoprene
PRICE: \$47.50

- The Tideline features a 5mm neoprene upper, heavy-duty zipper, and a gusseted zipper opening to reduce water exchange. The thick rubber outsole features a proprietary tread pattern for outstanding traction. The Ergo™ shaped footbed contours the natural shape of the foot for increased comfort. Men's and women's sizes available.

directly behind us. They were wearing cotton T-shirts and shorts, and no warpaint, and they weren't carrying spears, but to me, the unspoken menace was palpable. These people did not appreciate the "Important White Man Ruse." We resolved nothing at that meeting, so with time to wait while tempers cooled, we joined the local teenagers at the Internet center. A young girl, about 11 or 12, on the cusp of womanhood, with taut polished skin, was intensely focused on her Facebook page, driven by the almost unbearably slow and unstable connection. When my computer bogged down, she explained that I had to constantly hit the "refresh" button and then wait patiently for signals and electrons to do their thing. Then she returned to her own mysterious communication with someone who lived across the street, or in Kazakhstan, or someplace like that.

On the following day, with the

permission issue still unresolved, Ender and I hired a local guide to take us to the edge of the nearest tepui. Then we followed a narrow creek into a slot canyon cut through the ancient rock. As the canyon narrowed, we approached the unmistakable sound of a waterfall cascading off the high mesas. When there was no more solid ground, we waded and swam upstream, until the current was so strong that we had to pull ourselves onward, hand over hand, using fixed ropes that locals had secured. As we left the greenery behind and entered the dark space encapsulated by rock, I felt as if gravity had reversed and become repulsive and we were climbing downward, into the bowels of the Earth. The force of the flowing water, constrained by the cliffs, created pulsating blasts of wind that drove sheets of mist into our faces. At a final bend in the canyon, we crawled out of

the stream onto a small rock ledge and tried to continue the last 15 or 20 yards to the waterfall, but blasts of wind held us back. I stood, lost in my own non-thoughts, shirtless and shivering, in that cathedral lighting again, entombed in the Earth's innards, in this land of blowguns and Facebook.

We eventually received permission to continue downstream, provided we travel with a guide who accompanied us in a motorized dugout. Two days later, we encountered a rapid. I scouted the green tongue with a chaotic wave train at the bottom (Class III), but realized that you could easily punch the lateral on the left and ride green water to the bottom (Class II). Or, as a third possibility, there was a portage on a well-worn trail river-right.

Our guide explained that the rapid was impassible. (Hadn't he known the conditions before we started?) He told us

CONT. ON 68 ➔

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GEAR

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PACKING FOR A BEACH-HOPPING WINTER ESCAPE



Early winter in the mountains brought short days and a shed full of orphaned gear. The water had left the rivers, and there was still too little snow for skiing. The desert called. Southern Utah? Too dry. SoCal? Too crowded. Tacos, ocean touring, and soul-surfing south of the border sounded more like it. So we pulled out the long boats and headed down Baja way, where one side of the peninsula offers prime surfing on deserted beaches, and the other a sea kayaking dreamscape. First, we loaded enough boats to take full advantage of both coasts. Then we crammed the truck full of every camping comfort it would take, right down to a hand-cranked margarita blender. ¡Bienvenido a Mexico! – By Zak Podmore

Camp on a Baja beach starts with shade, always a rare commodity on the peninsula. We were thankful to create our own with the **Kelty Shade Maker 2**—easy to set up, tall enough to stand under, and (once properly secured to stakes, water jugs and car) able to withstand gale-force blasts (\$200, kelty.com).

The next thing to keep cool was the cerveza, along with some freshly caught grouper and a value pack of hotdogs we hoped not to open. Enter the rugged, ice-retentive **Canyon Coolers Outfitter 50**. Made of nearly indestructible roto-molded plastic (just like our river kayaks) the premium Outfitter put my old picnic cooler to shame, and doubled as a cutting board (\$259, canyoncoolers.com).

We completed the kitchen with **Eureka's Catskill Table**, a shock-corded aluminum slat table (\$119, eurekatent.com). This burly (16-pound) fold-down adjusts to provide a level surface for taco artistry, and a worthy arena for **Coleman's Gladiator** stove. Featuring Coleman's new HyperFlame technology, this gladiator did battle with vicious gusts, its pair of high-output propane burners producing piping-hot coffee in all conditions (\$149, coleman.com).

We kept a half-gallon of that joe steaming through the night in the stainless steel **Hydro Flask Growler**, and roused the crew for a pre-dawn start to an ambitious day of paddling

on the Pacific (\$55, hydroflask.com). At sunset we were ready for a cold crushed-ice margarita, so we put the hand-cranked **GSI Vortex Blender** to work (and it is work). The Vortex produced remarkable smoothies all week, and even whipped the cream for a pumpkin pie fresh out of the Dutch oven. (\$115, gsioutdoors.com).

We slouched down and kicked back in **Therma-a-Rest's TReO Chair**—a welcome surprise for a smaller camp chair that packs tightly and cleverly into its own sturdy tripod base (\$99, cascadedesigns.com). When the fire died, I retired into the new **Mountainsmith Mountain Dome 2** (\$240, mountainsmith.com). While the hexagonally shaped, spacious two-person home quickly proved its worth for sleeping bodies and for storing gear, at 7 pounds, we opted to leave the tent body behind on an overnight tour and set it up using only the poles, fly and ground cloth. But for Baja basecamp, I shed the fly and happily watched the Milky Way appear through four mesh walls inside a **Sierra Designs Backcountry Bed**.

The innovative zipper-less bag (think oval-shaped entry, covered by tongue-like integrated comforter) kept me, first, warm at night with its lighter (600) DriDown fill, then comfy in the early morning, catching a few more Zs with the comforter untucked as the morning sun brought warmth to another day in paradise (\$249, sierradesigns.com).



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Level Six Triton

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We loved the tough construction and clean lines of this suit, cut from Level Six's proprietary eXhaust 3.0 waterproof-breathable fabric, with Bi-Layer reinforcement in the seat, knees and arms. We liked the wide cuffs and zippered pockets—five altogether, including two at the hip plus a chesty with a bonus key compartment. The only feature missing is a spray skirt tunnel—good riddance if you're an open canoeist, rafter, or standup paddlers. Whitewater kayakers may want to consider L6's excellent shoulder-entry Emperor suit (\$850, levelsix.com)



Bomber Gear Palguin

Light weight and hi-tech

Bomber Gear uses Polartec's ultra-light NeoShell fabric in the Palguin, new for 2015. The hi-tech material sheds water, breathes like a 250-pound marathoner, and has a distinctly lightweight hand. A unique leg entry (the zipper is in the suit's inseam) eliminates the need for a separate relief hatch and leaves the upper zipper-free. The design enhances the Palguin's free-and-easy feel, though it does make the suit less versatile on land. No tying the arms around your waist: This suit is either on or off. (\$1,000, bombergear.com)



Stohlquist Shift

Touring in comfort and style

The Shift is a touring suit you can live in, featuring a jacket-like layer that provides wind and rain protection with or without the neck gasket engaged. We liked the burly 3-Layer Rampart fabric, a waterproof-breathable material with a polyurethane membrane specially formulated for use in salt water. A removable hood, reinforced knees and seat, and integrated suspenders add to the expedition-ready feel. What's not to like? All these features add some weight and bulk. (\$950, stohlquist.com)



Mythic Sobek

The best you can buy (for \$250)

No proprietary space-age fabric, neoprene cuffs or reflective piping. Not even a spray skirt tunnel. Just a chest zipper and set of gaskets secured to three-layer waterproof-breathable nylon. The Sobek has just one thing going for it that we love: a price tag approximately one used boat less than the going rate for fancier alternatives. A drysuit is an essential piece of safety gear, and we recommend you get the best one you can afford. If your budget is \$250, this suit is the best. (\$250, mythicdrysuits.com)



Kokatat Idol

The world's first two-piece drysuit

New for the 2015 season, the Idol is the first-ever two-piece drysuit. The prototype we tested has the familiar Kokatat quality, cut from waterproof-breathable Gore-Tex fabric with reinforced seat, knees and shoulders. We loved the versatility of this ensemble, which functions as an expedition-ready drysuit or a simple drytop. The breakthrough technology is a 360-degree waterproof waist zipper, and a zip-pull protected by a tiny drybox. (\$1,100, kokatat.com)



WHAT'S UNDER YOUR DRYSUIT?

Peak under the gaskets of four year-round paddlers

BY NEIL SCHULMAN



1

Paddler: Tom Pogson

Home Waters: The Gulf of Alaska, near his home on Kodiak Island

Typical Conditions: Frigid seas and air temperatures down to minus-10 degrees

Under the Drysuit: A mix of traditional wool and heavy fleece. "I wear medium-weight SmartWool tops and bottoms as a wicking layer under a 200-weight fleece top and pants. I also wear heavy wool socks and when it's really cold, a storm cag over the drysuit. This system evolved over 15 years of paddling more than 100 days a year in Alaska."

Extras: A fuzzy-rubber hood or helmet liner, and oversized Kokatat Inferno mitts under pogies. "If you need to do a rescue when it's below freezing, you can't function without gloves on. The extra-large size keeps circulation in my fingers."

2

Paddler: Teresa Gryder

Home Waters: Whitewater streams in the Columbia River Gorge

Typical Conditions: Cold snowmelt rivers; chill winter rain to summer sun

Under the Drysuit: Polyester yoga pants and a polyester lightweight top, with a Nordic wool sweater. "Yoga pants are great for a drop-seat women's drysuit because you can stretch them down to relieve yourself, and they'll lay flat around your midsection. The sweater is warm and cheap, and I wear it after paddling too—I just change the baselayer to something cottony and dry."

Extras: Teresa prefers pogies for direct contact with the paddle shaft, but keeps a pair of gloves in a drybag. "When it's cold, I put a hand warmer inside each sweater sleeve."

3

Paddler: Dennis Pennell

Home Waters: Long canoe expeditions in northern latitudes

Typical Conditions: The full Monty. Lakes, rivers and whitewater in variable, often extreme, weather. Plus, black flies.

Under the Drysuit: Dennis wears two layers of lightweight SmartWool tops and bottoms, or a light- to mid-weight combo in warmer conditions. "You can't beat wool for warmth, reasonable dry time, and no stink after many days of paddling. Canoes are a wet ride in whitewater, and my lower body gets cold from splashes or water in the boat. Canoeing usually means more layers on my legs than kayaking."

Extras: Dennis swears by his NRS Mystery Helmet Liner, which is "toasty warm and sheds rain like a duck." He paddles in Glacier Glove Perfect Curve gloves. When temperatures plummet, he adds a pair of pogies.

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that we would have to ride with him back upstream to Kamarata, where we started, and then pass over the rapid in an airplane.

This man has to be kidding, I thought. But he wasn't kidding. After a lifetime of expeditions, all the times my partners and I had proceeded when logic and caution screamed 'retreat!', I looked around at the jungle, listened to the beckoning roar of whitewater, and then stared into Ender's broad face and tight smile. And as I absolutely knew he would, Ender agreed with our guide, citing further problems downstream. I countered his fears with plans and arguments, but my words were heard only by butterflies and beetles. I contemplated jumping in my boat and escaping, spray skirt unattached, flying into the whitewater with imaginary arrows and blowgun darts whizzing overhead. But that was needless romanticism. Instead, I said quietly, "If we go back to Kamarata and charter an airplane, I'm telling the pilot to take me home."

Ender replied, "At least we tried." Tried is a relative term; I don't know what it means.

I say, "At least we showed up." And in "showing up" I stood beneath the waterfall and walked through ancient forests, fearing snakes. Moreover, I followed an imaginary journey on an ice flow from the Nares Strait, until it melts in the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, which is carrying heat northward from the jungle on currents and winds that rotate across the globe with the spin of the Earth. I followed that slim and uncertain email into the unknown, where failure—whatever that means—was always an option. ■

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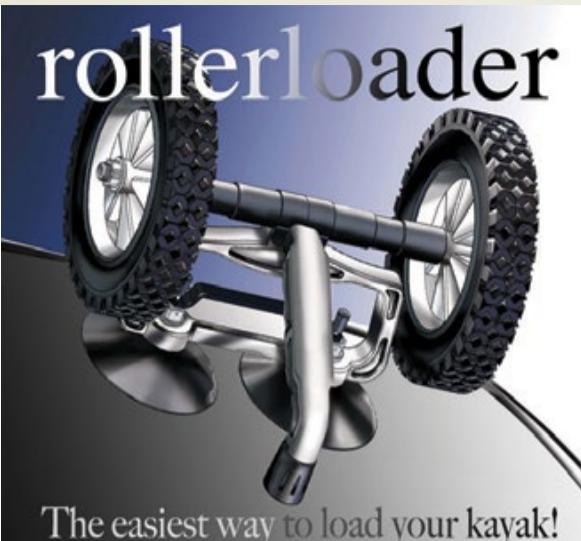
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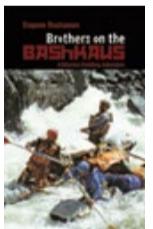
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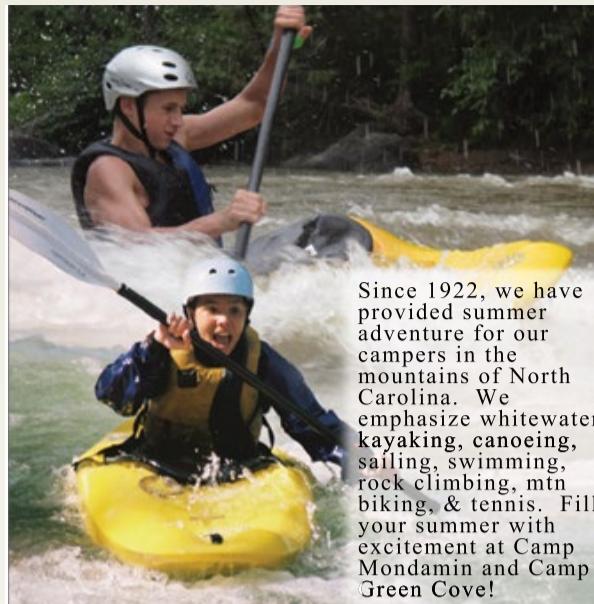
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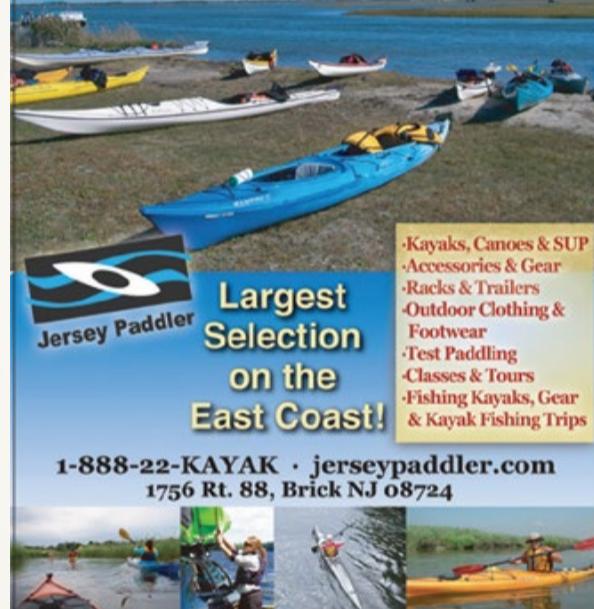
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DICK GRIFFITH

BOATMAN, PACKRAFT PIONEER

AS TOLD TO TYLER WILLIAMS

Among scholars of the wilderness voyage, Dick Griffith is best known for his epic foot and ski journeys across North America's Arctic. Now 87, Griffith is the only human to ski the Northwest Passage, and the first white man to cross Alaska's Brooks Range east to west. That traverse involved river travel, something that had been a mainstay of Griffith's wilderness repertoire ever since his pioneering runs of Southwestern rivers in the 1950s. To river-runners, he is revered as the father of packrafting. The seminal moment of that sport's history came in 1982 during the inaugural Alaska Wilderness Classic backcountry race. As other racers waited around a smoky campfire for the Skilak River to drop so they could ford it, Griffith arrived wearing a Viking-horned hat. He pulled a six-pound vinyl raft from his pack, quipped a jocular taunt to his younger competitors, and paddled across the swollen river, cutting a wake that generations would follow.

I was 12 years old when I read about Buzz Holmstrom's solo trip down the Colorado River. That inspired me to build my own boat.

The San Juan was my first river trip. The water was high, and I had no idea how to row, but I met Harry Aleson as I passed Bluff, Utah. He taught me some things. I hired on with Aleson as a boatman in 1949. On one of those trips, I met Isabelle. She helped fund my dream of re-tracing Holmstrom's route down the Green and Colorado.

Isabelle, Jim Gifford, and I launched from Green River, Wyoming in one wooden boat and one raft. We used Frederick Dellenbaugh's 1872 journals as our guidebook. The wooden boat was smashed to pieces at Disaster Falls in Lodore Canyon. Jim had to leave the trip in Green River, Utah, and I wouldn't let Isabelle continue with me. I thought Cataract Canyon was too dangerous for a girl.

I met Charles Lindbergh's son, Jon, at Dark Canyon Rapids—a significant rapid before Glen Canyon Dam. He had hiked in with a group of Explorer

Scouts. He was the only one who wanted to run the rapids with me, so I took him through. The next day, I saw a motorboat on the river, and Isabelle was in it. We floated through Glen Canyon to Lees Ferry, and got married the next summer.

We launched on the Green in Wyoming again in 1951, and continued all the way through the Grand Canyon. Dam survey crews in Marble Gorge gave us a ride in their cable car to the top of the Redwall Limestone, and fed us dinner. At Lava Falls, it was just a matter of squeezing between two rocks on the left. I guess that was the first inflatable boat to run the rapid. It was a Navy surplus model that I got for \$125.

I took that boat to Copper Canyon to lead an organized first descent of the Rio Urique. I thought we'd have a real river, but it was just a creek. We made 10 miles in eight days of portaging. Everyone went home, but Isabelle and I continued on foot. We built driftwood logs tied together with shoelaces to swim our gear across walled-in pools.

At a mining camp, we found a Tarahumara Indian who led us to a trail. It was a 200-mile trek to the nearest train station. We traveled back to Tucson, got our car, and drove to Fort Collins, Colorado, where I bought an Air Force survival raft at an Army surplus store. Then we drove straight back to Copper Canyon. With the packraft, I shuttled three native guides and Isabelle across

pools, one at a time, and we finished our trip.

The next time I used a packraft was during my first long walk in the Arctic, a 450-mile trek from the Arctic Ocean to Anaktuvuk Pass in the Brooks Range. That boat was good for crossing rivers, but at 15 pounds it was too heavy, so I abandoned it.

I used a cheap Sevylor raft that only weighed six pounds during the first Alaska Wilderness Classic race. It took me three hours to float a section that took the other guys 15 hours to hike. If I was more competitive I could've won, but I like to sleep. After that, people realized that if you want to get around in Alaska, you have to have a packraft.

In 1991, I went back to the Grand Canyon, 40 years after my first trip. Nobody had run the river with a packraft, so I figured I ought to do it. I couldn't get a permit, so I painted my 5-pound boat camouflage brown and went anyway. I crawled under the raft when helicopters flew over. I camped away from the river, but people still saw me on the water. I caught a cold virus and the park was after me, so I hiked out at Phantom Ranch and flew back to Anchorage.

A few weeks later, I hiked back in and did the rest of the Canyon to Diamond Creek. Things sure had changed since my first trip down there, but there was still lots of wild country to explore. There still is.



Stolen from
Dick Griffith



FIRE AND ICE

Everything but
locusts in the
Canadian Arctic

BY CONOR MIHELL

Last summer, brother and sister Sawyer Kesselheim, 21, and Ruby Zitzer, 19, completed a 1,000-mile crossing of the Canadian Barren Lands with their cousin, Quinn Mawhinney, 24, and friend, Kelly Kjorlien, 22. The expedition from Great Slave Lake to Hudson Bay via the Hanbury and Thelon rivers spanned 41 days amidst the worst wildfire season in Northwest Territories' history.

RUBY: I started thinking about the trip in my junior year of high school. I wanted something long—at least 30 days. Starting in Yellowknife meant we could drive in and fly out. I wanted to be on the tundra and go over the height of land and paddle a mix of lakes and rivers.

SAWYER: It was originally going to be an all-girls trip but Ruby needed one more person. It was an opportunity that does not come around often. My sister and I work well together and I've always wanted to plan a trip like this with her. I was excited about being out there without distractions and enjoying the challenges and simplicity of camping and traveling.

RUBY: On Day Eight we were stopped by ice on Great Slave Lake. For a few days we could weave and shift through the ice but then it became more solid. We were making two miles per day. It was exhausting and awful. It was early in the trip but we were already worried about running out of food.

SAWYER: When we saw the smoke of wildfires, we expected exploding trees and raging fires like at home in Montana. But up there it was more of a smoldering ground fire because the trees are so small. The smoke was the biggest challenge because it made navigation tough. There were days we were unsure if we could move due to low visibility.

RUBY: Once we got through the ice we had to push really hard—getting up at 4 or 5 a.m. and paddling 30- to 40-mile days. We had 15 straight days of headwinds. That meant few bugs, but I'd take mosquitoes over wind.

KELLY: The emptiness and expansiveness of the tundra draws you in. It's a playground of sorts. Since we needed to spend so much time on the water, it was always a nice break to get out of the boats and romp around in the pillows of moss.

RUBY: We grew up doing big trips with our parents. There were definitely times when Sawyer and I wondered, 'What would our parents do?' We really looked forward to telling them about the trip when we got home.

SAWYER: Ruby is so easy to travel with. She's also one of the toughest people I've ever met. She was always first in line to carry the canoes.

RUBY: Oh yeah, I want to go back. The tundra is one of the most powerful places I know.





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